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## CHESTNUTS AND SMALL BEER



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# CHESTNUTS AND SMALL BEER

BY

H. J. JENNINGS

AUTHOR OF "CURIOSITIES OF CRITICISM," "CARDINAL NEWMAN, THE STORY  
OF HIS LIFE," "LORD TENNYSON, A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH," "OUR  
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TO  
SIR SAMUEL WARING, BART.

THIS VOLUME IS INSCRIBED  
IN ADMIRATION OF HIS QUALITY AS A MAN  
AND IN WARM RECOGNITION OF HIS  
FIDELITY AS A FRIEND

BY THE AUTHOR

1920

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# CHESTNUTS AND SMALL BEER

## CHAPTER I

An invitation and an apology—Fishing for a career—Amateur acting—A trial on the stage—I appear as a statue—Mrs. Kendal's early days—The Bristol stock company—A theatrical oddity—"Oirish" *v.* Scotch.

IN presuming to invite my readers to a little after-dinner entertainment in the form of an old journalist's reminiscences, I much regret that, owing to the distressful times in which we now live, and the national need for economy, I am unable to offer them the customary accompaniments of Walnuts and Port. I have, therefore, ventured to substitute the more frugal fare of Chestnuts and Small Beer, and while hoping that the chestnuts will not be found indigestible, I can assure those who partake of my Lenten hospitality that even if the small beer is thin it is genuine home-brewed, and free from any ingredients likely to endanger their sobriety. Some of my friends who are in the habit of regaling themselves at the tables of the New Rich, may perhaps be disposed to turn up their noses at this unassuming and simple provision, but I ask them to qualify their scorn with the reflection that I am both helping the Chancellor of the Exchequer by reducing unnecessary expenditure, and furthering

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the interests of dietetic reform for the benefit of the over-fed.

The life of a journalist, unless he be a war correspondent, or an investigator sent on a dangerous mission, is made up more of routine than of adventure. He is in touch every day with exciting events, but is rarely a participator in them. It is useless therefore to look in this record for any thrilling personal incidents. A newspaper editor could never by the greatest powers of imagination be made to play the part of the hero of a shilling "shocker." He can be as ruthless as Atropos with his abhorred blue pencil, and violent in his vocabulary towards a political opponent, but otherwise he is a meek and inoffensive gentleman who could not speak unkindly to a misanthropical hedgehog. He even lacks the public spirit, when there is a dearth of crime, to fill the gap by committing one himself. He sits in his chair and criticises the faulty methods of particular rascals, but he does not attempt in the interests of scientific perfection to show how the thing ought to be done. So, really, he is an unenterprising person, strikingly devoid of that craving for notoriety which is the mainspring of the adventurous life.

The narrator of the odd happenings of a journalist's life cannot therefore pretend that he is one of the Romantics. He has not rescued damsels from ogres, or been cast into a noisome dungeon beneath the castle moat, or even figured



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in the Divorce Court. Nevertheless he thinks that some interest may attach to half a century's intimate connection with the Press, and proceeds to tell his story accordingly.

I began to learn journalism when I was twenty-two. Before then I had tried several other occupations with more or less instability of purpose. As I had some aptitude for mechanical drawing my people thought I ought to be an architect, and I served two years as an articled pupil to a firm who specialised in what may be described as "Wesleyan Chapel Gothic." Then I spent a few months in a wine-merchant's office, where I had opportunities of sampling choice vintages, and acquired a nice, if expensive, palate for wines. At another time I acted as a ledger-keeper for Peek Bros., the well-known tea merchants in Eastcheap. I could narrate amusing stories about these experiments, but they would be "outside the work." There is, however, one other experience upon which I ought to dwell a little because it was indirectly connected with my introduction to journalism. I wanted very much to be an actor. Perhaps I may go so far as to confess that I thought I *was* an actor. At any rate, I made a short and not very glorious appearance upon the stage; and this bent, and the people with whom it brought me in contact, were to some extent responsible for my later ambition to become connected with the Press. I shall therefore take the liberty of relating, by way of prelude, a few



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of my experiences in the Theatre, and of theatrical people.

I began as an amateur, and if the proper definition of an amateur be one who works for love and not for money, I may claim to have always been an amateur, for it is the melancholy truth that in the few brief trials I had upon the "real stage" the "Treasury" was one part of the theatre with which I had no practical acquaintance.

I had only been inside a theatre three or four times when I was asked to take part in an amateur performance in which some local newspaper men were interested. It was for a charity, and the play chosen was "Speed the Plough," chiefly remembered to-day by that immortal phrase, "What will Mrs. Grundy say?" My part—*Gerald*—was a small one, but I was very much in earnest with it; so much so that at rehearsal, when *Gerald* has to threaten the leading lady (Miss Burton, the amiable and accomplished wife of Tom Robertson, the dramatist) with a horse-whip, I was greatly concerned because I was not permitted to "lay on" actually instead of in make-believe. The performance, which took place at the King Street Theatre, Bristol (the programmes were printed on satin, I remember), was literally my first appearance on any stage. Shortly afterwards there was another amateur performance for the benefit of a popular local actor, and I was entrusted with the more responsible part of *Sir Frederick Blount* in "Money." So indulgent

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to my inexperience were the local critics that I quite made up my mind I had nothing to do but to seek and secure an engagement, and "witch the world" with my light comedy graces. If I recollect rightly it was out of this performance that the Bristol Histrionic Club grew, and I think I may claim to have been one of its founders.

The craving of the stage-struck is one of the most unaccountable traits of modern humanity. In nine hundred and fifty cases out of a thousand the aspirants have no sort of qualification for acting—they cannot even speak the King's English correctly; and of the other fifty not half-a-dozen ever reach the beginnings of distinction. They fancy they are potential Irvings, or Trees, or Ellen Terrys, and only the logic of hopeless struggle and bitter failure can cure their delusion. A child crying for the moon is not a more pitiable object than a young man with stage aspirations and no aspirates.

Although not "aitchless," I had the complaint in a severe form. I wrote several letters to Mr. J. H. Chute, the lessee and manager of the Theatres Royal Bath and Bristol, asking him to give me a trial in his company. By dint of much importunity I at last succeeded in persuading him to engage me for four weeks without salary as a "general utility" man—the next grade above that of a "super." It was a comprehensive "line of business," that made one liable to become a

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Greek warrior or the hind-leg of a pantomime elephant, as might be required.

Brough's classical extravaganza, "Perseus and Andromeda," was put in rehearsal, and as a start on the ladder that was to raise me to distinction I was cast to represent one of the statues. It may be remembered that when the Gorgon's head is exposed a number of Greek citizens are instantaneously turned into stone. In order to produce the desired effect the actors who represented the citizens were dressed half in dark material and the other half in white, so that when they suddenly and simultaneously turned round, and struck various poses to represent arrested movement, they looked, or were supposed to look, like pieces of statuary. At the final rehearsal, Gordon, the scene-painter who had the arranging of this scene, wanted to try the effect of a face-whitening process, and rather maliciously made me the *corpus vile* of his experiments. With a bowl of whitewash and a brush he proceeded to give one side of my head a liberal coat of whiting, much to the amusement of Ellen Terry and the other ladies of the company. It happened that I worshipped Ellen, who was then a fair-haired, dimple-cheeked damsel of about fifteen, as a poor little moth may worship a distant star; so my annoyance at being tricked out in such humiliating guise may be imagined. Outwardly, I may have looked as cold as marble, but a volcano raged within. Even at the actual performance we statues, all ready for our transfor-

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mation, must have been a droll spectacle, for the scene-shifters and the gasmen grinned when our pied bodies glided to and from their appointed places. As I went to the dressing-room to wash off the hateful white mixture I passed Mr. Chute. He smiled and quoted the line, "Let not Ambition mock their useful toil."

The only speaking part I recollect having played in the four weeks was that of a blind harper in a short run of the Irish melodrama, "Peep o' Day." It would appear that my pronunciation of the Irish brogue was adulterated with the broad dialect of Gloucestershire, for at the end of the probationary period Mr. Chute wrote to me regretting that he could not make further use of my services, on the ground that I had a "Bristol twang." I thought at the time that he had invented the excuse; but whenever I visit Bristol now and hear the natives talk, I am bound to admit that their manner of speech would not sound particularly well in poetic or romantic drama.

I do not remember that I went to Bath during those four weeks, although the Bristol company generally played there on Saturday nights. I often went there, both before and after, for my own pleasure. One such occasion was the opening of the new theatre, after the old one had been burnt down. The play was "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and Mr. Arthur Wood, the first low comedian of the company, was *Bottom*. Wood



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was a clever actor, and a man of parts, but he was just a little bit over-sensitive to criticism. Hence, when a Bristol weekly paper of literary pretensions took the liberty of suggesting certain modifications in his reading of the character, he was ill-advised enough to write a resentful letter for publication, at the foot of which the sly editor put this comment: "Mr. Wood seems rather thin-skinned about his *Bottom*."

One more note about Bath. It will always be associated in my mind with Madge Robertson (now Mrs. W. H. Kendal), who was personally conducted by me, at her parents' request, through the main streets of that city to see the illuminations on the night of the Prince of Wales's marriage with Princess Alexandra.

At a later period, when a half-blown critic, I had the pleasure of giving Madge Robertson some of her earliest appreciative Press notices. I rather think, but am not quite sure, that one of them was in connexion with her *Cinderella* in a Christmas pantomime, a very charming and natural performance. At that time she always spoke as if she had a cold in the head (Charles Kean was similarly afflicted), and it was a long time before she got rid of a trouble which, while it did not spoil, certainly did not improve, her acting. For actress she was from the beginning, even when she did nothing but "go on" in crowds and figure as an "extra lady." Born of theatrical parents she trod the boards almost from infancy,

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and never had to unlearn any awkwardness in the control of her arms and legs. That "Cinderella" pantomime was a memorable one, not only for her *début* in an important part, but for the graceful and debonair Prince of Henrietta Hodson, the Baron of George Rignold, and the ugly, elderly sisters of Arthur Wood and a comedian named Andrews. It was an intelligible version of the nursery story, splendidly acted, and with just enough fooling to throw the serious acting into better relief. I have never seen so good a pantomime since, although many far more gorgeous.

Although no longer a member of the Bristol company, I continued to take an interest in its doings and was a frequent visitor to the theatre. Mr. Chute's stock company was always a notable one. Many famous actors were trained in it. Bristol and Bath were looked upon as a stepping-stone to London, where all ambitions centred. At one time or other, Miss Cleveland, Arthur Stirling, Marie Wilton (Lady Bancroft), Madge Robertson, Henrietta Hodson (afterwards Mrs. Labouchere), Kate and Ellen Terry, Juliet Desborough, William and George Rignold, Charles Coghlan, Frank Celli, and W. H. Vernon were members of the company.

I must devote a few words to one of the minor members, an actor named Eugene O'Reilly, commonly known among his intimates as "the General." It is, perhaps, incorrect to describe him as an actor; as a rule he merely "went on";

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but outside the theatre he enjoyed a remarkable degree of popularity in convivial circles, and was hail-fellow-well-met with all the "young bloods" of the city. He was a zealous toss-pot, and his zeal, like Bardolph's, "burnt in his nose." I never saw him in any other coat than a threadbare one that had once on a time been black, and was always kept buttoned or tied together with string in an endeavour to conceal the absence of a waistcoat. His linen was of much the same colour as that of a Princess of the Middle Ages who vowed a big vow that she would not change it until Ostend was taken—an event that (to the economy of her laundry bill) was indefinitely postponed. In spite of his dilapidated externals, O'Reilly was always welcome in the Bohemian society of Bristol. He was considered a past-master of smoking-room repartee, and many who, mistaking rudeness for wit, presumed to provoke his caustic Irish tongue, had cause to regret their temerity.

There was a Scotsman named McAndrew living in Bristol at the same time, who had much the same sort of reputation. He had a biting humour combined with complete indifference to an opponent's feelings. One evening a number of the young fellows about town—nowadays they would be called "the boys"—arranged to bring these two famous verbal duellists into the same room without either of them knowing that the other was to be present. In full expectation of a great battle of wit, or at least of personalities,

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the smoking-room of the Llandoger Tavern in King Street—at that time the theatrical house *par excellence*—was crowded. Every chair was occupied and there was a fragrant aroma of toddy. O'Reilly was comfortably seated at one table, and McAndrew, who came in shortly after, took his place in a chair that had been nursed for him at the next. As both men remained mute for some time, at least so far as showing any disposition to prove each other's mettle was concerned, attempts were made to "draw" them, and a discussion on national foibles was started for the purpose. Neither of them interposed. It was clear that the champions had become aware of each other's presence, and shirked rather than invited an encounter. Pointed remarks were provocatively uttered, but the bait was not taken. Not a word was said by one that the other could take hold of. It is impossible to retort to silence, or to distort the meaning of the unspoken. When the waitress came and said, "Give your orders, gents.," there was a momentary relaxation of the self-imposed, iron-bound rule. O'Reilly simply said, "Oirish," and McAndrew simply said, "Scotch."

Five or six times during the evening their glasses were replenished, always preceded by the same curt, non-committal formula. Whisky loosens most men's tongues, but it did not loosen theirs. By an almost superhuman effort of will they maintained their stubborn silence. What



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implied but unuttered challenge—what stinging suggestion of contempt—lay behind O'Reilly's mellow call for "Oirish" and McAndrew's dry demand for "Scotch" will never be known. The honours were easy, or to be exact there were no honours at all. The carefully-staged entertainment was a fiasco; the pipes were provided, but the figures would not dance; the spirits (of cutting badinage and veiled abuse) were called from the vasty deep, but they would not come. When the company broke up in the early morning, two grim and silent men staggered home through the quiet streets, thinking, no doubt, of the brilliant things they *could* have said if the proper cue had but been spoken.

## CHAPTER II

An impulsive prompter—I go “on tour”—A rag-fair *Cassio*  
I upset the management—A lecturing experiment—Cricket-  
ing recollections—A stage fluke.

ANOTHER Theatre Royal “character” during many seasons was Charley Adams, the prompter. He was an excellent prompter, but had one great defect—over-excitability. If any little thing went wrong on the stage he lost his head completely, rushed about, prompt-book in hand, gesticulating and screaming a torrent of abusive language that might have been blended from a dockside tavern and a sporting sub-editor’s room. Once during the performance of a Shakespearean play, one of the “extra ladies” went timidly up to him and said, “Please, Mr. Adams, am I a French or an English courtier?” “You’re a —— fool,” was the shrieked and foaming answer. On another occasion, Miss Desborough was standing at the prompt wing watching a performance in which she was not taking part. Suddenly there was a stage wait. Some one who ought to have appeared did not appear. The audience began to murmur. The people on the stage looked at each other, at the prompter, and remained speechless. Charley, distraught, and not knowing what he was doing, caught hold of Miss Desborough’s shoulders and

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pushed her on to the stage, gasping out : " Go on, you blank, blank, blank, go on." By that time the missing actor had stolen in and the dialogue was picked up again ; but Miss Desborough's meteoric appearance in ordinary dress had so startled the audience that they were some time in settling down to listen to the play. Poor old Charley ! he was always horrified when afterwards told what he had said in his mad moments of lost self-control. The victims of his brief wrath were the first to forgive him, for they realised that he knew not what he said.

My withdrawal from the Theatre Royal company took place near the end of the season, when most of the actors were anxious about summer employment. It shortly afterwards became known that a " manager " was haunting the theatrical taverns with the object of picking up cheap recruits for a company he was forming for a touring season in Monmouthshire and South Wales. I quickly made his acquaintance, and had no difficulty at all in getting engaged for " responsible business," with a magnificent promise of eighteen shillings a week. His name was Chadwick. I learnt afterwards that he had originally been a Lancashire clog-dancer who, having by some means got admitted into Freemasonry, made diligent use of " the square " to advance his own material interests. He did not act himself, but confined his activities to the business arrangements. His wife was a middle-aged, flabby, reddish-haired

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lady, who had at one time acted with Macready. Her manner to members of the company was, in the ordinary way, haughtily arrogant, but could be judiciously thawed into a condescending geniality by invitations to partake of stout laced with gin—a beverage of which she consumed copious quantities. There were times when her personation of Shakespearean heroines was less clear and coherent than Shakespeare or even Macready would have liked.

For the audacious Chadwick dared to mix Shakespeare with “Aurora Floyd,” “Flowers of the Forest,” and “Maria Martin, or the Murder in the Red Barn,” in order, I suppose, to gratify all tastes in the little ironworks town of Blaenavon, where we made our first and (as it turned out) only appearance. The “theatre” was a large room over a malthouse, furnished with rows of hired benches. It says something for the courage of the manager that he put out his bills and opened the house with only one painted backcloth and not a rag of a wardrobe.

Thus the matter of costumes became very interesting when such a play as “Othello” was put up. Chronological accuracy was not insisted upon; ingenuity was more in evidence than antiquarian knowledge. I was cast for *Cassio*, and being naturally desirous of looking something like the character, I went to the expense of getting a costume made for the occasion. I bought the materials at a local draper’s and the “heavy

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man's " wife put them together for me, neither of us having the least idea to what century " Othello " belonged, or what style of dress would have been appropriate. My costume was a pale-blue tunic and trunks, trimmed with yellow braid and imitation lace, patent leather dancing pumps and flesh-coloured tights. If any one had been seen, even in mediæval times, either in Venice or Cyprus, in such daring attire, he would probably have been pelted by street urchins, and certainly would have deserved his fate. Still, it did for Blaenavon, and as the local critic who corresponded for the *Era* had made of himself a beer-vat at my expense, he generously recorded that I " dressed the part with originality and good taste." I will refrain from describing what *Othello*, *Iago*, *Roderigo* and the *Duke* and *Senators* wore: it would read too much like the catalogue of a jumble-sale.

When three weeks of really hard work, with new parts nearly every night, had passed without any mention of salary, and disquieting rumours about Mr. Chadwick's dilatory methods being in circulation, I was getting " fed up " with the business, and quite ripe for revolt. An occasion quickly came. " Macbeth " was to be put on, *Lady Macbeth* being one of the parts in which Mrs. Chadwick had shone when with Macready (or so she said), and I had to play *Malcolm*. I learnt the part, rehearsed it, and then came the night of performance. Just before the curtain went up, I reminded Chadwick that I had no



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costume for *Malcolm*. "What the h——'s that to me?" he said. "Wear your *Cassio* dress and be d——d." The grotesque naïveté of the command to appear in the wilds of Scotland in pale blue with yellow trimming and bits of machine-made lace, did not then strike me so much as the man's truculent impudence. I was angry and independent to boot, and without making any attempt to get ready, I put on my hat, walked out of the premises, and never went inside them again. *Malcolm* was cut out, no doubt without great loss to the performance. As *Lady Macbeth* tumbled down in the sleep-walking scene and could not be prevailed upon to stand firmly on her feet again, the audience had no right to be inconsolable about the missing minor character.

As I had comfortable quarters at the King's Arms Hotel I had no immediate occasion to return to Bristol. But I was not going to be a cipher in the place where I had strutted and fretted on a ten-foot stage. There was a big club-room in the hotel, which I engaged for a night about a week ahead, and had handbills printed announcing that I should then deliver a lecture on—what do you think?—on "Life and Its Duties." Why that preachy title was chosen I have not now an idea; probably it was the aftermath of some earlier associations. I wrote out the lecture in two or three days, and committed it to memory in as many more, but I am quite sure there was very little about life's duties in it. I seem to

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remember that it was in a jocular vein and that I essayed to mimic certain odd types of character. Anyhow, I delivered it on the appointed night without a note and without a breakdown, winding up with a florid peroration which of itself ought to have been worth the free admission.

That was not all, however. A few days before I had ordered a dozen-case of champagne from Bristol, and it arrived in time for the lecture. No sooner were "life's duties" disposed of than we got up an impromptu dance with the aid of a fiddler who had been entertaining some iron-moulders in the tap-room; then the case of wine was opened, and the contents were distributed to the company—that is, as far as they would go amongst ladies and gentlemen with the driest of throats and the most persevering of endeavours. We kept up the fun until daylight crept along the tops of the surrounding hills, and then broke up into parties, and went out to welcome the dawn and get an appetite for breakfast.

Soon after, Mr. and Mrs. Chadwick suddenly disappeared, leaving every one in the lurch—the owner of the room unpaid, the printer unpaid, most of the members of the company unpaid—even a big bill for liquid refreshments unpaid. But by then I was back in Bristol, so I missed the opportunity of gloating on the spot over the ignominious exeunt of that well-matched, unscrupulous pair.

I found time for cricket in those days, and



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Durdham Down, on the fringe of Bristol, near to which my people lived, was, and still is, a grand public playing-ground. The Graces were then attracting attention. "E. M.," indeed, had already become a popular exponent of the game. I knew all the family, old Dr. Grace, Mrs. Grace, their athletic daughters (one of whom was an excellent harpist), and all their sons, as well as "uncle" Pocock, who did so much to shape the boys at the wicket. Willie—he went through the various name-stages of Willie, Gilbert and W. G.—was six years my junior, and when he was a lath of a lad of thirteen I graciously permitted him to bowl to me now and then for practice. The ungrateful young scamp was altogether lacking in the consideration due to one so much his senior, and I grieve to have to confess that he spread out my stumps much oftener than I managed to defend them.

Poor Freddy Grace was afterwards making a great name for himself when he was cut off by a chill contracted through sleeping in a damp bed. I once saw him take the three stumps of an undefended wicket with three consecutive balls, a marvellous example of deadly accuracy. I had to give up my cricket early—I never cut anything of a figure at it—and opportunities of resuming its practice did not occur again; but some of my happiest days have been spent in reporting matches at Clifton, Bath and Cheltenham, and in watching their ever-varying fortunes as an

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ordinary spectator at Lord's, the Oval, Trent Bridge, Brighton and other county grounds.

To return to the theatre. I had only one other engagement. I happened to be in Nottingham, and having learnt that the light comedian of the local theatre company was leaving a fortnight before the season's end, I sent in an application to be permitted to fill his place without remuneration, and my modest request was acceded to. The Theatre Royal was then in Warser Gate, and the manageress was a Mrs. Saville. I recollect playing *Cecil Vane*, the leading comedy part in "Faces in the Fire," and in a little love comedy in which I had to woo Miss Emily Saville. After the first performance of the latter piece, I was told that I made love like an automaton, which was no doubt true, for I was struggling all the time to remember the words; moreover, it was my first experience in that line of business—on the stage.

But I chiefly remember playing *Whitewash* in "Retained for the Defence," a kind of patter-farce. *Whitewash*, who is a lawyer, has to get up on a chair and deliver a speech in the approved court-of-Quarter-Session manner. It went all right at rehearsal, but at night, owing, I suppose, to the unfamiliarity of so exalted a position, I lost the thread of the speech, and should have come to an abrupt stop if I had not taken refuge in the desperate expedient of pouring out a meaningless torrent of words, as inconsequential as the stump oration of a burnt-cork nigger. On I went,

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flourishing my arms and using whatever words came uppermost, for I had to find my way to the cue somehow, and I had not the faintest recollection what the cue was. By and by there was a laugh, then another, then a shout of laughter and a big round of applause. I must have said something funny, but I was quite unconscious of anything but the perspiration of a mental anguish caused by the puzzle how I was to wind up and descend from that accursed chair.

How it was done I know not—I never knew. I must have stopped talking, for I found myself standing close to the footlights, listening to a furore of applause. My impromptu oratory had “caught on.” For the first and only time in my life I was a popular favourite. The secret of it, as I learnt afterwards, was that all this farrago of incoherent verbosity and wild gesticulation was an almost exact mimicry of the methods of a local celebrity. I had perpetrated a caricature without knowing it, and I woke the next morning, like Lord Byron, and “found myself famous.” Unfortunately the season ended a couple of days later, and with it ended my prospects of theatrical distinction. I could not expect to make another successful fluke, and although Mrs. Saville was pleased, she knew that I had only just missed an ignominious breakdown, and dexterously put aside my suggestion of a re-engagement for the next season. There was nothing for it but to find my way back to Bristol.

### CHAPTER III

A lucky inspiration and a journalistic beginning—Reporters fifty years ago—A Church Congress scene—Playing at monks—"Strictly in confidence"—The three weird sisters are shocked—An interview with Dickens—Our "literary" sub.—Unusual incident at a murder trial.

I WAS now over twenty-one years of age and had made no real start in life. My attempts so far to find a congenial occupation had been to all appearances futile, but I am sure they were not entirely useless. In each of them I had learnt a little, and even a superficial knowledge may come in handy at times. I knew something of architectural styles and terms, something of the brands and qualities of wines, something of stage life and something of commercial book-keeping, and in the aggregate this miscellaneous assortment of superficial information was likely to be of more use than an acquaintance with the philosophy of Confucius or with the arguments for and against the Nebular Theory. All the same I was again at a loose end.

One day curiosity took me into the local police court to listen to the night-charges. Three or four reporters were present taking notes, two of them members of the Histrionic Club, and I became fascinated with their work. As their pencils flew across the note-books, I thought, "What

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an interesting life! How much better than a humdrum office, how superior in variety even to the stage!" The next day I went again, and the next after that; in fact so frequently that I got friendly with the court officials.

Naturally enough an immediate effect of these police-court visits, supplemented by others at longer intervals at the Assizes, was a determination to qualify myself for the Press. To this end I bought the instruction books published by Isaac Pitman and diligently set about teaching myself phonographic shorthand. I also spent a good deal of time in the Bristol Free Reference Library, where I had very useful guidance in the choice of books from Mr. Pryce, the librarian. Meanwhile I contributed verses to the poet's corner of a local weekly newspaper, and tried my hand now and then at an essay on some historical subject.

In the course of a few months I thought that with this practical preparation the time had come for me to make a start. Luckily my first shot was a bull's-eye. I wrote to the editor of the *Western Daily Press*, stating my qualifications and offering to give my services for the first six months without remuneration. An interview resulted, my proposal was agreed to, and for thirty-two years from August, 1864, when I began my duties, I was never for a single day out of a newspaper engagement. I had found my right groove at last. The work was hard and involved late hours, but it was interesting, varied and often



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exciting. It took me down a coal-mine and up in a balloon, to criminal trials and revival meetings, to prize-fights, executions and bazaars. Six happy years I spent on the *Daily Press*, owned by Mr. Peter Macliver, under the kind and encouraging editorship of Mr. Walter Reid. When I joined Mr. Macliver's paper, it had been only a few years in existence, but had already proved a highly successful venture. He lived in a villa at Clifton, which, in remembrance of his "native heath," he named "Iona House." A rival journalist was wicked enough to say that Mr. Macliver was so conceited about his prosperity that he wrote his letters on paper stamped, "I own a house."

A reporter's life on a provincial newspaper was in my time a constant round of variety. As a rule he was a shorthand writer who had started as a compositor, but he also had to chronicle *quicquid agunt homines*—cricket matches, billiard exhibitions, plays, concerts, picture shows, political speeches, literary and scientific addresses, Town Council and Board of Guardians' meetings, trials at Quarter Sessions and Assizes, Church Congresses, sermons and Foresters' and Oddfellows' feasts. Unless the occasion was one of exceptional importance it was generally the junior's business to do the inquests. To this I never objected after learning that the inquest reporters were usually included in the panel, and that the jurors were paid a shilling per case less a penny they gave as a tip to the Summoning Officer. In a really busy



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week, with two, three and sometimes four inquests a day, one was able to serve one's country and make sixteen or eighteen shillings for one's self. It meant viewing a lot of dead bodies, a practice which produces either repugnance or callousness.

I have just mentioned Church Congresses. It was at one of these at Clifton that Father Ignatius, of the Order of St. Benedict, fluttered the dove-cotes of the country parsons by appearing on the platform tonsured and in cowl, sandals and other monkish garb. He was an ordained priest or deacon of the Anglican Communion who wanted to restore the monkish system of the Middle Ages in the Church of the nineteenth century; hence his appearance caused quite a sensation. The craze had comparatively few disciples, but it happened that there was a curious outbreak of it in Bristol. Charley Dundas, a well-connected young fellow with some command of money, set on foot a local branch of the Order, and as "Prior Cyprian," played a leading part in services that were carried on in a loft in a shabby back street, where incense, processions, crucifixes, candles and resplendent vestments attracted people in search of sensation. Charley—I cannot say by what bond—was a frequent companion of mine. He gave excellent spatchcock and champagne suppers, but his vagaries were very trying, inasmuch as he was continually indulging in some odd outbreak or other and then imploring me not to print it.

One of the strangest sights I ever witnessed

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was a midnight street procession of the Prior and his acolytes to St. Michael's Churchyard. They moved along at a Dead-March pace, carrying banners, thuribles and lighted candles, and chanting dismally in Latin what seemed to be extracts from the Roman ritual. Arrived in the churchyard they all knelt down, and the Prior intoned a prayer with a mock solemnity that said something for his histrionic ability. The only other people present at this weird scene were a couple of amused policemen, half-a-dozen giggling nymphs of the pavement, a strayed reveller or two reeling homeward in his cups, the present narrator, and the editor-proprietor of another newspaper. What the proceedings meant, or were intended to mean, I much doubt if Dundas knew himself.

On the next day I wrote a long account for the *Press*, bantering the Prior and his company of mummers, and generally trying to treat the whole affair with good-natured ridicule. Even this did not cool Dundas's friendship or lessen his hospitality in the matter of spatchcocks. The event was, nevertheless, the last flicker of the O.S.B. in Bristol, which lingered for a while in an invertebrate and nerveless condition, and finally disappeared when its leading spirit and financial supporter, still in early manhood, broke down in health and died before he should have done.

The other newspaper man I have mentioned as having been present at the St. Michael's extravaganza was the genial and brilliant editor and part

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proprietor of a Bristol paper. He was one of the old-fashioned sort who enjoyed his vintage port and sometimes loved it not wisely but too well. I once came across him in the street a good bit past midnight. He was in a jovially amiable mood with me, considering the difference between the status of a proprietor and that of a junior reporter, but a little erratic as far as the dynamics of the footway were concerned. To be candid, he wobbled; nay, he now and then reeled; and when he reeled he cannoned, and when he cannoned there was dire peril of a double sprawl for himself and whoever was supporting him. As he was a greatly-esteemed patriarch of the Press I volunteered to accompany him home, which meant a walk, or a series of lurches, for a couple of miles or so, with due attention throughout to the preservation of his perpendicular. As we proceeded slowly and with many divagations through the silent streets, he stopped every now and then, looked at me with the solemnity of an owl, and said, "You w-won't p-put this in the *P-press*, Jennings, will you?" I assured him repeatedly that he was, so to speak, in a tiled lodge; yet he returned to the question so often that I think he was doubtful. Needless to say, I "kept dark," both in the "*P-press*" and in other channels of publicity. My dear, mellow old friend met me many times after, and he invariably winked and gave me a nudge. It meant volumes and I understood.

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For a few weeks, at an early period of my connection with the *Press*, I lodged at Redland, in the villa of three old maids, where I had a tiny sitting-room and a bedroom. These ladies were the ugliest trio I have ever seen in one family. They could have appeared as the witches in "Macbeth" without having to "make up" their faces at all. I am afraid their dispositions were no better than their features, although they had sittings in a fashionable chapel and professed to be religious. It happened that the proprietor of the *Press* held some sort of lay office in the same chapel, and the "weird sisters," knowing of the connection, thought it their duty to keep an eye upon my moral conduct.

When, therefore, I had an actor (Robertson *père*, the father of Madge and Tom Robertson) to share my half-shoulder of mutton one Sunday, and spent part of the afternoon in playing picquet with him, their righteous sense of duty was aroused. On my ringing for tea they all three came into the little room, stood in a row inside the door, and proceeded to direct against me and my innocent guest a flood of vitriolic abuse, the dominant themes of which were the diabolical character of the theatre and the inevitable fate of Sabbath-breakers. No sooner was one sister exhausted than another took up the thread of invective, and when all three had had a say, the attack was vigorously begun again. At last they wound up by saying that they could not afford to imperil



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their immortal souls by harbouring such a vile sinner any longer, and that I must quit the next day.

That was not all. Early on the Monday morning they went in a body to the *Press* office, and insisted on seeing Mr. Macliver. To him they recounted my dreadful crimes of entertaining an actor and playing cards on a Sunday, and they thought that being members of the same congregation, their accusations would carry great weight. But Mr. Macliver, if he did go to chapel, was a man of the world, and the pious Gorgons left the office crest-fallen and rebuked. I vacated their rooms the same evening, and found a temporary resting-place amid less austere surroundings.

It was one of my early privileges to hear and report a reading, or to be more correct a dramatic recital, by Charles Dickens at the Victoria Rooms, Clifton, one of that series the strain of which undoubtedly shortened his life. The pieces chosen on the occasion were "The Murder of Nancy" and "Bob Sawyer's Party." It would be superfluous to add anything to what has been said by others about Dickens's great powers as a character actor, and I shall not presume to lay my poor coat of gilding on the refined gold of earlier critics. I should, however, like to say that the personation which stands forth in my memory to-day was the little "slavey" at the house in Lant Street, Borough. I can still seem to hear as distinctly as I did then her snuffling, cold-in-the-head voice

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when she announced to Bob, " You can't have no warm water, Missis Raddle said you warn't to have none, and Missis Raddle raked out the kitchen fire afore she went to bed, and locked up the kittle." The reporters present had ten minutes' chat with Dickens after the entertainment, at his own request. He begged them, with a twinkle in his eye, to remember, as if it were a great distinction for the city, that Bob Sawyer was a Bristolian.

During part of the time that I was on the *Press*, we had a sub-editor who had formerly been a schoolmaster and claimed to have " literary tastes." He exemplified them in strange ways. I once used in the MS. of an article the Shakespearean term, " three-man beetle." The critical sub. no doubt said to himself, " Three-man beetle ! That's nonsense ; there's no such a thing as a three-man beetle. He " (meaning me) " must have meant three-legged beetle," and to three-legged beetle it was accordingly altered, and, to my horror, so it appeared in print. Another time he was going through the proof of an electioneering speech by Mr. Samuel Morley, a prominent dissenter, in which the speaker quoted Macaulay's line, " For never saw I promise yet of such a bloody fray." With a superfine delicacy that overshot the mark the sub-editor struck out the adjective and put a — in its place, giving many chapel-goers a severe shock by implying that one of the chief pillars of Nonconformity had been guilty of using a vulgar expression from the " dash dialect." This was



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years before Mr. Bernard Shaw had taught Society to regard the word with amused toleration. Even "damn" in those days was invariably printed "d——n" in the newspapers, as if some professor of cryptic meanings or skilled decipherer of hieroglyphics were being invited to find out the missing letters. The ex-pedagogue certainly did not shine as a sub-editor, so he was translated to the assistant-editorship, in which position he distinguished himself by producing a leaderette of forty-seven lines without a full-stop, except the one at the end, and by copying from a Shakespeare with a misprint, "Familiar in their *months* as household words," and sticking to it that "months" was right because it was in the book.

Poor old Clynes! Much may be forgiven thee, for thou had'st "literary tastes."

I was always glad when my chief marked me in the reporters' diary to attend to the Assize Courts, particularly the Crown Court. The intense drama of an important criminal trial had a great fascination for me, and I regarded the judges and the big Q.C.'s as demigods. I had not at that time met any of the judges in private, or seen them without their judicial robes, and they impressed my youthful imagination with a sense of their power as no other men have ever done since. I am only going to name one of them here, and that one because he was associated with an incident unique in my experience of Bench and Bar.

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This was Mr. Justice Byles, a dry, acute, pains-taking lawyer, and an eminently fair judge. He was trying a sailor charged with mortally stabbing another sailor in a dock-side quarrel—one of those crimes which are of almost ordinary occurrence in seaport towns. The counsel retained to defend the prisoner was a stuff gownsman, a member of a well-known and wealthy Jewish family connected with Bristol commerce. He had had some, but not much, local experience, and no doubt felt his own shortcomings and the weight of his responsibility. When at the close of the prosecution he rose to address the jury, “on behalf of the unfortunate man in the dock,” instead of making an extempore speech, he proceeded to read in a dull monotone from an elaborate manuscript folded like a brief. He had not got very far before Justice Byles pulled him up.

“Mr. A.,” said His Lordship, “this is really most unusual. I cannot permit you to read a speech. It is contrary to the customs and traditions of the Bar. If you do not feel competent to conduct your case in the usual way, I shall have to adjourn the trial and ask some other counsel to defend the prisoner.”

Mr. A. was taken aback. He turned crimson, hesitated, apologised, and said he would do his best. And a very painful best it was, disconnected, jerky, muddled as to facts, and calculated to make the guilt of the prisoner—of which there was not a shadow of doubt—clearer than before.

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He made no attempt to show that it was a case of manslaughter, and not of murder, but tried to establish the absurd plea of accidentally wounding. When he sat down, after a quarter-of-an-hour of feeble struggle, the prisoner must have felt the rope already tightening about his neck.

But the judge was as merciful as he was just. In summing up he put the defence as strongly as the facts permitted, and did his best to atone for the counsel's incapacity. The evidence, however, went to prove hatred and wilful intent, and the jury, after deliberating for a long time, found a verdict of "Guilty," and sentence of death was passed. It was not carried out. Whether the Home Secretary got to know how the defence was bungled, I cannot say, but he granted the prayer of a largely-signed memorial and commuted the sentence to one of penal servitude for life.

I have been in Court hundreds of times, but that was the only occasion on which I ever heard a barrister attempt to address the jury from manuscript.

## CHAPTER IV

Reporting weddings—Convivial lapses—The Mayor's '34 port—Henry Vincent the ex-Chartist—J. B. Gough—I sign the pledge and break it—Freaks on show—Chronicling a prize-fight.

THE reports of weddings were a feature of the Bristol newspapers, and reporters were often sent long distances into the country to collect the materials. Sometimes they were invited, but more often they were not. In most of the latter cases, however, they were heartily welcomed and liberally spoon-fed with the necessary information. We generally went, three or four of us, to the bride's father's house in a body, and the first thing, as a rule, was to pay close attention to viands from the wedding-breakfast that were laid out in the study, or elsewhere, for our repast. Then we had to get the assistance of one of the bridesmaids to describe the dresses—by far and away the most important part of our duty. There was one of our number who was a sort of man-milliner at this work; he was familiar with the names of all the materials used in fashionable dressmaking; so much so that the rest of us left the cross-examination of the lady to him, taking down as well as we were able the unfamiliar nomenclature of the modiste's workroom. There was generally

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plenty of champagne on these occasions, and when we had got all our notes we made merry.

Sometimes we met with an inhospitable reception. Three of us once went uninvited to a house in the country, two miles and a half from the railway station. It was a wretched day, snowing hard and thawing at the same time. The roads were three inches deep in slush, and we were cold, wet and miserable. On inquiring if we might have particulars about the wedding, the father of the bride came to the door, and in a most forbidding manner said that it was a private affair, that no publicity was desired, and that no information would be supplied. We were not even asked inside; no "creature comforts" were offered to us; had we been prospective burglars spying out the land we could not have been more churlishly treated. There was no help for it but to trudge to the station, where there was neither hotel nor refreshment-room, to wait two hours for a train, and then to travel back to Bristol. It is not necessary to describe our feelings, or to reproduce our comments. We had some sort of a revenge, however, by writing paragraphs headed: "A Strictly Private Wedding at W——," "A Mysterious Wedding," and "Why this Secrecy?" which gave rise to indignant remonstrances by the old gentleman in the country, followed by a flood of epistolary "chaff."

These champagne luncheons were looked upon as the "plums" of a reporter's work. They



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were, in fact, almost an inducement to some of us to study the details of millinery. That this wine-bibbing was good, I won't pretend to say, but I may put it on record, partly by way of open confession, that during my long connexion with the Press I was only on two occasions so affected by drink as to be unable to do my work; both were in the early days, and the cause of both was indulgence in unaccustomed liquors. One was at a farmers' dinner at Yatton, where a terribly potent mixture called "Warwick," compounded of hot port and brandy, was tossed off in tumblers. How I got back to the office, I don't know. Fortunately the editor had gone home, and the foreman compositor charitably said that he had not room for another line of copy. The next day he showed me my report of the farmers' dinner. A spider escaped from an inkpot and crawling over a sheet of paper would have produced equally legible results. Those jovial Somersetshire farmers ought to have known better than to tempt a young fellow with such a "hot and rebellious" drink as "Warwick." But perhaps, after all, he did not need very much tempting.

The other occasion was the coming-of-age of the Marquis of Worcester (now the Duke of Beaufort). I had to get to Badminton House by road, and engaged a gig for the journey. On arrival I was handed over to the care of the butler, and after a look round the grounds, where an ox was being roasted and village sports were in progress, was



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taken into a comfortable room and regaled with cold boiled beef and ale. And then my good friend the butler produced a jug of something special which he poured into a tall, narrow glass with as much care as if it had been 1820 brandy or '34 port. It was ale that had been brewed when the Marquis was born, and was consequently twenty-one years old. Nothing could have been nicer. Soft and silky, with a nutty flavour, it slipped down as easily as milk, and did not seem as if it were a bit stronger. I ought to have been warned. Perhaps I *was* warned and ignored the warning. Anyhow, I drank two full glasses, and then—a blank. What happened, I do not know, but probably I fell into a deep sleep. Late in the evening I recovered enough to get into the gig and start for Bristol. All I can say is that the horse did the rest.

Mention of '34 port reminds me of a dinner given by a Mayor of Bristol to the members of the Press on the occasion of his vacating office. He was a rather ostentatious little person and fond of expatiating on the exceptional character of his household possessions. One of the reporters present was a modest, inoffensive young fellow named Brownlow, who knew very little about pictures and still less about wines, and who was certainly incapable of anything in the nature of sarcasm. The dinner went off all right, and at the usual stage port and sherry were introduced. Our host took up one of the decanters, and said :

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“ There, gentlemen, I’m going to ask you to taste something very special. This is a fine old vintage port—’34.”

“ Shillings? ” asked Brownlow, in complete unconsciousness that he was saying anything wrong.

The Mayor glared at him and the feast proceeded. By and by the decanter came round to me, and I have already said that I had picked up a fair knowledge of wines and had rather a nice palate. I promptly came to the conclusion that Brownlow in his innocence had blundered on what was very near the truth.

Another of my earliest duties was to report a lecture, or, as it was then called, oration, by Henry Vincent, the ex-Chartist, who had undergone imprisonment for political views that are now considered mild and harmless. He was a humorist, with a funny little chuckle when he said something intended to cause laughter, a keen satirist, and an excellent mimic, who made fun of the foibles and fashions of the day, and taught good, wholesome common-sense, winding up with a peroration framed in the regulation elocutionary crescendo. Vincent was a very short man with a long grey beard. He had to stand on a stool on the platform in order to be high enough to command his audience, which was always crowded. Once when people were still trying to squeeze in after the oration had begun, and there were angry cries of “ Shut the door ! ” from the audience

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already seated, he held up his hand and said, "Never mind the door. Keep the door open and the mouth shut," which, with one of his inimitable little chuckles, restored good temper. Grand old Henry Vincent ! I can yet hear with my mind's ear his quaint comments and mirth-provoking imitations "shooting folly as it flies" ; I can still with my mind's eye see him on his little stool, a rugged, picturesque figure, with a merry twinkle in his own eye, or a curl of scorn upon his lip, as he jested and scarified in turn.

On another occasion I had to report J. B. Gough, the temperance orator, a duty that had a sequel of which I still feel a little ashamed. The greatness of Gough was due to the fact that he was orator and actor combined. His illustrations were wonderfully realistic, and he held his audience, consisting of people of every class and creed, spellbound by them. I have heard many famous speakers, but none of them superior to Gough in the power of moving and holding a great mass of people. There cannot be real oratory without the dramatic faculty. However eloquent the language may be, however lofty the sentiment, however noble the cause advocated, the speech sounds tame and cold unless all these qualities are fused in the white heat of impassioned fervour.

Gough's power was extraordinary. No sooner had he finished than scores of men and women, boys and girls, flocked up to the long table near the platform to sign the pledge. They had been

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carried away, and rendered irresponsible beings for the time, by the magnetic force of the speaker. I fell under the spell myself the first time I heard him, and, unable to resist, went to the table and put my name to an undertaking to abstain from all intoxicating liquors. It was done in a moment of splendid sincerity, but I had hardly left the hall when the force of habit drove out all recollection of the heroic resolution, and before I knew that I had done it, I had broken the pledge with a glass of beer.

The Broadmead Rooms were also let for other entertainments. I saw General Tom Thumb and Commodore Nutt, and their respective wives there—very self-important little people with a full sense of their own merits; also the Siamese Twins, two unfortunate men joined together by a fleshy ligature, and condemned to be always in each other's company. Whether surgery discountenanced an operation, or they thought they were more profitable joined than apart, I do not know, but nothing in the nature of severance was attempted until one of them died, and then the imperative use of the knife failed to save the life of the other. Two coloured girls, joined similarly, were also exhibited as "The Two-headed Nightingale." Panoramas, conjurors—the great Professor Buck especially, with his Inexhaustible Bottle trick—and Thiodon's delightful show of mechanical figures, also appeared at the Rooms.

Bristol was always a great place for such amuse-



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ments as were fortunate enough to escape the Nonconformist ban. Circuses invariably attracted big audiences; Cooke's, Fossett's, Pablo Fanque's and—greatest of all—Hengler's. The last was located at the Drill Hall, and the entertainment was always varied and clever. It would seem as if the music-hall had driven the circus out of the big towns—a pity, I think, for exhibitions of good horsemanship and skilful acrobats are quite as pleasing as the most elaborate *revues*. I have never seen anything more elegant and graceful than Jenny Louise Hengler's illustration of the *haute école*, or heard anything more funny than the impromptu jests of Franks, the clown. Wallett, called "the Queen's Jester," was, in my opinion, over-rated. He had a lot to say, but most of it lacked point; he was, however, drawing to the end of his career when I saw him, and had possibly lost some of that brilliancy with which aforetime he had been wont to set the circus "on a roar."

At another early period I was told off to report a prize-fight. It was not the first I had attended, for when a boy of about eighteen I was taken by a sporting relative, at whose house in London I was on a brief visit, to the great Sayers and Heenan fight at Farnborough. I remember the terrible crush to get into the train, the incongruous mixture of all sorts and conditions at the ring-side, and the pushing and elbowing by little men to get a peep over the shoulders of big men; but nothing of the contest itself, for I could see nothing of it

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except an intermittent bobbing of two heads in what seemed to be a remote distance. The affair ended in a fierce dispute and wild confusion, and whatever knowledge I had of the details was obtained from a subsequent study of the newspaper reports. Still, having been at least present on the historic occasion, I was supposed to be something of an expert in P.R. matters, hence my selection to report the encounter between two local heavy-weights, Peter Millard and "Swaddy" Jones.

Like the actor who blacked himself all over to play *Othello* I made haste to learn the vocabulary considered classical for the occasion, consisting of such terms, for example, as "mauleys," "bread-basket," "bunch of fives," "ivories," "tapping his claret," etc. As it turned out this was wasted labour, for my report when written did not contain a word of slang, but was ironically phrased in the purest English I could muster.

It had been arranged that the fight—with bare knuckles, of course—was to take place on a little peninsula, mostly of mud, near where the Wye runs into the Severn, so that there should be small danger of police interference, and in order to reach this delectable spot an old steam-tug, fit only for scrapping, was chartered. It was an unholy crowd that she carried. All the scum and riff-raff of Bristol seemed to be on board, and every time the top-heavy boat rolled in the tide there arose on the early morning air an appalling chorus of oaths and blasphemies. I inwardly prayed



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that there was a Jonah present by whose sacrifice outraged decency might be propitiated.

Nothing happened, however, and we reached the *venue* in safety, and after the two gladiators and the ring officials had waded to dry ground through knee-deep Severn mud, the rest of us followed in batches as best we could. Of the fight itself I only remember that it lasted for many indecisive rounds, and was eventually declared "a draw" because the hands of both men were so puffed that neither of them could any longer strike an effective blow. On the return journey they got so drunk that they clung round each other's necks in a series of slobbering embraces, an even less edifying spectacle than the protracted conflict itself. Most of the company were also drunk. The air resounded with foul ribaldries and horrible profanities and reeked of the fumes of strong liquors. I was glad when, late in the afternoon, we got back to Bristol docks.

## CHAPTER V

Phenomenal feeding—Dr. Livingstone—Public executions—Comedy after tragedy—A chat with the hangman—The Exeter bungle—The Rev. W. M. Punshon's oratory—A dramatic speech by a North American Indian.

I REFERRED in a previous paragraph to the dutiful obligations I was occasionally under of going to "Foresters' and Oddfellows' feasts." This seems to invite a digression. Record-breaking is one of the features of the age we live in. The player who makes the biggest break at billiards, or surpasses all previous scores at cricket, enjoys a temporary distinction which even a *prima donna* or a popular preacher might envy. I have never scored 500 not out with the bat, or made a speech lasting twenty-four hours, or proved myself a superman in any other way ; but I have all the pride that may properly belong to one who during nearly sixty years has eaten over 7,000 public or semi-public meals. Now there may not be anything heroic in eating 7,000 meals unless you take into consideration the perils to one's digestion. Most of them were eaten in my capacity, and in performance of my duty, as a journalist. They were of all kinds and qualities, ranging from the Buffaloes' Annual Dinner, with its boiled mutton and trimmings, to the Lord Mayor's Guildhall banquet. I have

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sat down to policemen's feasts, municipal entertainments, City Companies' sumptuous dinners, Mansion House luncheons, to hospitalities "to meet" royalties, Masonic banquets, literary, theatrical and political knife-and-fork reunions; in short, every description of public mastication has called, and not in vain, for my self-sacrificing zeal. On one occasion it may have been such a supper as Henry Irving gave on the Lyceum stage on the hundredth night of "The Merchant of Venice"; on another a horseflesh banquet under the auspices of a food-revolutionising society of hippophagists. I have been sombre at dinners of thirteen, and merry at the Saturday night dinners of the Savage Club. At one time or other I have dined at small parties in the company of John Bright, Gladstone, Ruskin, Lord Randolph Churchill, Sir Charles Dilke, Lord Hartington, Henry Irving, Barry Sullivan, Lord James of Hereford, Lord Justice Bowen, Joseph Chamberlain, Colonel Fred Burnaby and a score of other past notabilities, and I have hob-and-nobbed, after satisfying meals, with at least a score of *bon viveurs*, who subsequently had to put up with the homelier fare of His or Her Majesty's prisons.

People have said to me, when I have chanced to mention my unusual opportunities of eleemosynary feeding in the bountiful days of "auld lang syne," "What a lucky fellow you are!" So they may have supposed, but pray do not forget that there is another side to the picture. Eating

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7,000 dinners, etc., has involved listening to nearly 30,000 speeches, ninety per cent. of which were largely composed of haws and hums, hesitations, repetitions and platitudes. Out of those 30,000 speeches I can recollect only a score or two to which it was worth while listening. Yet so ingrained is the British quality of uncomplaining endurance, that the others, with hardly an exception, were received with friendly patience and rewarded with forbearing cheers.

These thoughts are partly suggested by the recollection of a beautiful luncheon at Radstock, given by the Countess of Waldegrave and Mr. Chichester Fortescue to the members of the British Association. Everything was perfect, except the post-prandial oratory. One of the dismal old scientists talked and talked and talked until we began to think he had discovered, in the mechanism of the human tongue, the secret of perpetual motion. The Association was sitting at Bath for its annual meeting, and I was sent over from Bristol every day, to report the proceedings in one or more of the sections. The most interesting episode to me, was the appearance of the great Dr. Livingstone, the missionary explorer. He was good enough to favour me with a few minutes' chat. Writing entirely from memory I cannot be certain as to his exact words, but I think I can convey accurately the substance of one of his statements. "It would take hundreds, perhaps thousands of years," he said, "to bring

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the Hottentot to the level of the Western civilisation we see about us to-day; indeed it is far more probable that the white races, by continually advancing, will gradually drive the natives farther back until they disappear at last in an imperceptible process of absorption."

When I was a schoolboy, I saw Beale executed, and I had to witness more of these vindications of the law when they were carried out in the West of England, and particularly at Taunton. It was the custom of the Bristol pressmen on such occasions to go down by rail overnight and sleep at a well-known sporting hostelry. I cannot say that any of us allowed the impending tragedy to overshadow our conviviality. We sat in a large smoking-room, in a miscellaneous company, telling stories and singing songs until we went to bed to dream of green fields, children's gambols—anything but the grim spectacle of the reality. About seven a.m. we set out for the gaol, armed with official orders authorising us to be present at the execution. There was a great sameness about all these public exhibitions, for such in reality they were. One description, with a change of name, would have done for all. The criminal nearly always "ascended the scaffold with a firm step." That sentence was, indeed, the *pièce de résistance* of the narratives, and a reporter who once ventured, in a fit of reforming zeal, to paraphrase it, was severely rebuked by his fellows.

As soon as the inquest had been held, our



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reports, already written, received the finishing touches and were sent off to Bristol by the next train, and we were then ready to spend the day with our sporting Boniface, either in whipping a well-preserved trout-stream, or in the more exciting sport of otter-hunting. The "wretch condemned to die" had duly played his part, he had provided us with "copy," enriched in some cases with morbid details, and we thought no more about him. An otter-hunt in jovial company, with occasional nips of old sloe-gin, is an excellent corrective of the moralising mood.

When public executions were abolished things became different. There was a solemnity about the little private gathering that never characterised the roaring, swaying crowd. No ribald mockery detracted from the awful impressiveness of the procession from the cell to the place of execution, the tremulous muttering of the chaplain, and the twitching of the criminal's face. Journalists were not at all sorry when one prison authority after another took to excluding the Press. There was no longer any incentive to the heroics of a last dying speech, when there were no reporters present to record or invent it for the public.

On one occasion, instead of going to the otter-hunt, I made an excuse and stayed behind in order to have a talk with the official known as "the common hangman." Calcraft was then an elderly, grey-haired man, with a nice palate for ale, and a mild-eyed look that might have been

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read as indicating a sympathetic feeling for those in sorrow. He was what may be called old-fashioned in his business methods, that is, he flouted all suggestions of experiments, and had no scientific theories about long drops and short drops. What seemed to interest him more than anything except the growing of celery was the degree of self-control, or perhaps callousness, exhibited by his victims when called upon to submit themselves to his sinister attentions. One criminal, he said, was "all of a tremble," another "never turned an 'air," a third "twitched a bit at first, then pulled 'imself together and was quite jaunty-like, as you might say, at the end." Calcraft had a great idea of his own importance as an officer of the State. He regarded himself as a sort of personified Nemesis to whom Society was indebted for ridding the world of monsters. Instead of people looking upon his calling with abhorrence, they ought, he considered, to feel themselves under obligations to it. He summed up the matter thus: "Somebody's got to do it, and it's not everybody that's got the nerve to do it; therefore the man that can and will do it is doing just as much good as the judge what passes the sentence, and he deserves public gratitude accordingly." This attitude was at least more creditable than that of some later candidates for the post, whose avowed aim was to study, with scientific curiosity, the comparative advantages of death by strangulation and a broken neck.

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A few years later, when connected with a Birmingham newspaper, I interviewed another hangman, the one who had such an unfortunate experience with the man convicted of the Babbacombe murder. It may be useful to recall the circumstances of that mishap. By way of introduction it should be said that there were not a few people who doubted if Lee's guilt was clearly proved. Efforts to get the Home Secretary to intervene were, however, unavailing, and in due course the executioner received his instructions. To make intelligible what happened, it may be explained that the condemned man had to stand on a hinged flap held to the floor-level by a bolt underneath, thus forming a kind of trap-door which ought to have dropped away as soon as the bolt was drawn. In the old days the criminal who underwent capital punishment at Tyburn was driven under the gallows in a tumbril, and when the noose had been put round his neck, the cart was pulled away and the man's body was left dangling in the air. The platform and falling flap is a much more humane method—when there is no hitch.

In the Exeter case there was a series of hitches. The bolt would not work properly, the trap would not fall, and the poor devil who was shivering on the brink of eternity was kept for a considerable time in a state of indescribable suspense while three different attempts were made to hang him. At last, the governor of the gaol, thinking that this

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mental torture had lasted long enough, took upon himself the responsibility of putting an end to the scene, by ordering the convict back to his cell pending communication with the Home Office. The sentence was afterwards commuted to one of penal servitude. Many people, believers in divine interposition, declared that Lee's escape was due to providential protection vouchsafed to an innocent man; but they did not attempt to explain why many other innocent men have been allowed to go to their unjust doom without Providence taking the trouble to interfere.

My object in interviewing the hangman was to get from him his own explanation of the *contretemps* for which he and the prison officials were so severely blamed. "It wasn't my fault, mister," he said. "I went over everything the night before, and the same morning. The bolt worked beautifully, and the drop fell a treat, it did."

"How, then, do you account for the failure?" I asked him.

"The wood must have been damp and got a bit swollen, I suppose. I can't see any other reason."

"But could such an obstruction have developed in the very short time that elapsed after you had, as you say, tested everything and found it satisfactory?"

"I can't tell you anything more. I'm more upset about it than I can tell you. I've turned off



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a few in my time and never had anything go wrong before. It's bad luck, that's what it is! I knew for two or three days before that something bad was going to happen, and it did."

That the poor man was genuinely distressed by the reflections cast upon his skill through such an unprecedented bit of bungling was evident by the tears in his eyes and the break in his voice as he tried to exculpate himself, but could find no convincing evidence on which to do it.

As a change from the gruesomeness of the preceding paragraphs I will make a brief mention of the Rev. W. Morley Punshon, one of the leading lights of Wesleyan Methodism. As a preacher he was unsurpassed; as a lecturer he was, in my judgment, unequalled. He had a harsh, grating voice and a very homely face, yet he had not been speaking five minutes before his voice seemed like mellow music and his face was transfigured. Although I had no leaning whatever to the doctrines of Methodism, I spent many Sunday evenings in hearing Punshon preach. I recollect one sermon vividly. It was an attempt to prove that Hell was not to be taken in a figurative, but in a literal, sense, and that "eternal punishment" was not a mere *brutum fulmen*, but a terrible certainty. With great earnestness and eloquence, the preacher propounded these views, and held his congregation hushed in a kind of adoring terror. And then, at the finish, he leant over the pulpit, and lowering his voice to an impressive whisper,



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said : " There *is* a hell ; believe me, there is a hell."

It was a highly dramatic finish, and it sent a wave of emotion through those of the hushed congregation who " believed they believed " in everlasting fire and brimstone. Farrar's *Eternal Hope* had not then been written, and the mediæval idea of hell was still a very comforting morsel to the orthodox.

I have said that Punshon was a great lecturer. His lectures, however, were not strictly lectures ; they were not read, though they were committed to memory and recited with a good deal of dramatic expression. In " The Huguenots " there were some fine passages full of brilliant antitheses, with more than a touch of Macaulay's manner, and the descriptions of the leading personages in that great religious drama of the sixteenth century were cameos of delicate portraiture. The lecture on " Wilberforce " was memorable for a vivid and even thrilling account of a slave-hunt, in which you could almost hear the baying of the bloodhounds on the fugitive's track. There must have been something in an eloquence which, after fifty years, stands out in the recollection with all its clear-cut force and impassioned beauty.

I knew Mr. Punshon very well ; for a few months I was a member of a debating society that he started ; and although it may seem incredible to those who have known me in later years, there

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was at one time a suggestion that I should qualify myself for the ministry. Perhaps the fact that all my relations were Methodists, and that I had been educated at a Wesleyan College, had something to do with a suggestion that now seems grotesque. My unstinted admiration of Mr. Punshon's great powers in the pulpit and on the platform may also have encouraged the belief that I had a "serious call," whereas I was just as brimful of original sin as ever.

Perhaps the most dramatic speech I ever listened to was delivered at a Wesleyan missionary meeting which I was sent to report. The chief attraction—the "star turn," if I may so call it—was a converted North American Indian chief, who appeared on the platform in full war-paint. His obvious purpose was to prove the civilising effects of Christianity, and he did it with plentiful gesticulation, and many of his native grunts. When he came to describe how the converted warrior gave up his murderous propensities, and abandoned his weapons, he suited the action to the word, drew his tomahawk from his belt, brandished it in the air, and shouted, "Away with the scalping-knife! Away with the tomahawk!" with a thrilling touch worthy of the Old Surrey Theatre. His realism was, indeed, a bit too real, for the handle of the tomahawk slipped from his fingers, and sped hurtling across the room, causing shrieks of fear and a mighty uplifting of self-protecting hands. I do not know if any one was

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hurt, but it must have been a close thing for persons in the back seats. And this exciting entertainment was given at no greater cost to the spectators than that involved in a voluntary collection !

## CHAPTER VI

Past politics in Bristol—The hustings collapse—Some famous barristers—The Road murder—Trial of Constance Kent—An impressive death sentence—Theatrical and musical criticism—Sims Reeves and his ailments—His little joke.

POLITICS we had, like poverty, always with us, and I went through two or three contested elections while on the *Press*. Before the public nomination of parliamentary candidates was abolished, there were animated and even rowdy scenes on those occasions at Bristol. The hustings of timber were erected in a covered side of the quadrangle of the Corn Exchange, and were filled to overflowing by the leading supporters of the rival candidates. All the ground space of the quadrangle and the neighbouring roofs were given up to the public, presumably electors, but including a strong leaven of the residuum whose business it was, for consideration duly handed over, to do the dirty work of their social superiors. It was these hirelings who showered blue or red dust over their opponents, and aimed decomposed eggs at prominent men on the platform.

Scarcely a dozen words of the speeches were audible beyond the front-row seats where, right in the firing-line, sat the reporters, fully exposed to the egg-snipers of both armies. The turbulent masses were swayed backwards and forwards,

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to the one side and the other, as each party momentarily prevailed, the fracas ending sometimes in dangerous breaches of the peace. I was once the favoured target for a rotten egg of more than ordinary self-assertiveness, which caught me right on the mouth, bespattered my clothes, and left traces of its distinctive aroma after many days.

But the most serious mishap in my experience was when, at one nomination, the temporary structure of the hustings gave way, and its occupants—Mayor, City Councillors, Liberal and Conservative supporters, candidates, policemen and pressmen, some 200 in number—were precipitated into the wreckage, “in one red burial blent.” I do not know who was speaking at the time, but I think it would be justifiable to lay two to one that Tennyson’s line exactly fitted the circumstances: “The rotten hustings shake to his brazen lies.” Fortunately no one was killed; many, however, suffered from broken bones, cuts and contusions, and the licensed places in the neighbourhood were soon doing a brisk trade in restoratives. It is superfluous to add that there was no vote of thanks to the Mayor for presiding.

This was before voting by ballot had been introduced, and when election day was nomination day multiplied by  $x-x$  standing for the number of polling-booths in a constituency. It was a day, as a rule, of rampant rowdyism, of indiscriminate treating, of political zeal expressed in the terms of beer, of black eyes and bleeding noses. Each



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voter, as he went to his appointed booth, conducted by an agent flaunting party colours, was mobbed by the hirelings of the other side, and as often as not came out of the *mêlée* a mass of bruises. There was no such thing as really independent voting. The shopkeeper had to support the cause of his best customers or take the consequences, and employees, voting virtually under the eye of their master, took their cue from him and did as he wanted.

It was not as if the ballot had never been thought of. Year after year, the Hon. F. H. F. Berkeley, one of the members for Bristol, brought forward in the Commons a resolution in its favour, and year after year Lord Palmerston secured its rejection with a speech of banter and derision. Its subsequent adoption in legislative form has proved so satisfactory in the interests of public order, and so fatal to the exercise of undue influence, that no one could now be found to advocate a return to the old way.

It was through an election incident that I made the acquaintance of Serjeant Ballantine and Montagu Williams. They were specially retained to defend at the Quarter Sessions a prominent local solicitor of Conservative views who was charged with inciting a riotous mob in the course of a contested election. While the trial lasted, the two imported counsel put up at the White Lion Hotel, and on one of the evenings they invited two other reporters and myself to come and have

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some food and a chat with them. It was a very amusing evening, but not, I am afraid, reportable. Those who knew the learned serjeant will not need to be told that his conversation was racy. It was full of anecdote, not of the Sunday-school brand.

It was certainly not because the Western Circuit had no luminaries of its own that these famous Old Bailey practitioners were brought down. J. D. Coleridge (subsequently Lord Chief Justice), J. B. Karslake, Sir F. Slade, R. Collier *pat. pre.*, and Montagu Smith—to name only some of them—held high rank in the Nisi Prius Court. Mr. Coleridge was one of the suavest and most polished speakers who ever addressed a jury. He was called the “silver-tongued orator,” and the name was not ill-deserved. The only barrister who, so far as my experience goes, approached him in this quality of smooth, easy-flowing and refined English, was Sir J. Lawson Walton. But Coleridge carried bigger guns and rose at times to loftier effort and a more impassioned eloquence. He was a subtle cross-examiner, too, with a seductive way of luring a hostile witness to make fatal admissions, or of producing some confusion of mind of which he would afterwards make pitiless and deadly use.

Some years later, I heard part of his cross-examination of the Tichborne claimant in the first trial, and although his constant repetition of the phrase : “Would you be surprised to hear ? ” was made great fun of at the time, there can be

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no doubt that the shaking he gave that arch-impostor was the foundation of the prosecution at bar that resulted in his conviction and imprisonment. At the Bristol Assizes, Coleridge was always a tall and commanding figure, but the commercial nature of the majority of the causes he fought did not give much opportunity for flowers of rhetoric. At Wells once I heard him prosecute a man for wife-murder. The accused had gone home late at night, after his wife was in bed, put out the light, and then killed her with a hatchet. It was the phrase "put out the light" that gave Coleridge the cue for an apt and telling quotation from *Othello*—

"Put out the light, and then *put out the light.*"

This, spoken in a whisper in the otherwise dead silence of a crowded court, made a wonderfully dramatic impression.

The mention of Coleridge brings to mind the trial of Constance Kent at Salisbury, which I was called upon to assist in reporting. My connexion with the Press had not begun until a considerable time after the Road Murder was committed in 1860. Road is a village near Trowbridge, and one of its residents in that year was Mr. Kent, a sub-inspector of factories. He had been twice married; by his first wife he had several grown-up children, one of whom, Constance, was sixteen; and by his second wife three, including a little boy just under four. This little fellow was taken out

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of his cot one night, carried downstairs to a place outside the house; there his throat was cut and the body was hidden where it was found the next morning.

Who was the murderer? The inquest did not solve the mystery, though it encouraged a number of suspicions. Reinforced by Detective Whicher from Scotland Yard, the local police suspected first one and then another of the inmates of the house, but could not bring forward proofs sufficient to warrant a committal to the superior court. A nurse-girl, Elizabeth Gough, was accused and arrested; then Constance Kent was charged with the crime; and in both cases the Wiltshire justices were called upon to say if there was a *primâ facie* case. Constance was defended by Mr. (afterwards Sir Peter) Edlin with so much skill in belittling the evidence for the prosecution that the magistrates, while refusing to acquit her, called on her father to find sureties for her re-appearance if necessary. Hints were then thrown out of Mr. Kent's complicity, and so tangled was the flimsy web of evidence that the Home Office, in a fresh effort to solve the mystery, caused a special investigation to be made by a Mr. Skeat.

Public excitement during many weeks was intense; the newspapers were thrown open to the theories of amateur detectives; the police came in for severe criticism. Then Elizabeth Gough was re-arrested and subjected to a new inquiry, with the same result as before. Inspector Whicher



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persisted in his opinion that Constance was guilty, mainly because of the inexplicable fact that one of her night-dresses was missing; yet there was no new evidence, the law seemed powerless, and the Road Murder, after raging the sensation of a season, gradually passed into the category of unsolved mysteries.

And so it remained for five years. Then the ghastly story was revived by the startling announcement that Constance Kent had confessed. She had been placed under the religious care of a High Church clergyman at Brighton, to whom she admitted in confession that she killed her little step-brother. This clergyman, while keeping inviolate her confidence, persuaded her that it was her duty to tell the authorities; and, under this influence—much discussed at the time—a full statement of her guilt was voluntarily submitted and her arrest promptly followed. The proceedings at Salisbury were brief. They were, in fact, a foregone conclusion. When called upon to plead, the prisoner said “Guilty” in a faint but perfectly-controlled voice. She was very pale and her expressionless features were almost stolid; otherwise she was, at this stage, calm and self-possessed. Mr. Justice Willes asked her if she wished her plea to be understood as the law understood it, namely, that she had wilfully, intentionally and with malice killed her baby brother. She did not answer until the question had been repeated, and then simply said “Guilty” again.



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Before sentence was passed, Mr. Coleridge said he had been instructed to say that the prisoner exonerated every one else from any responsibility for the crime—the guilt was hers and hers alone; also that any stories of her having been unkindly treated at home were without the smallest foundation.

Then came the most trying scene of all. The judge passed sentence of death, and in reviewing the circumstances of the crime was moved to tears. Constance Kent herself, unable to preserve her self-control any longer, was shaken with a storm of sobs, and the whole atmosphere of the court became suddenly emotional, almost to the verge of hysteria. Several old members of the Bar, accustomed to hearing the death-sentence passed, told me that they had never been so deeply affected as on this occasion. Constance was not hanged; her sentence was commuted, and she spent many years in penal servitude.

Amongst my multifarious duties were those of criticising theatrical performances and concerts. It was surely by one of Time's whirligig revenges that I was put to sit in judgment on my old friend Chute, who had dismissed me from his company as unsuitable. It was like putting a discharged private to review his late commanding officer's regiment. Mr. Chute, however, had no cause to be apprehensive of any vindictive feeling on my part. I was too fond of the theatre to be unkind to it, and too friendly with most of the

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actors to be censorious. If I had wanted revenge, I could have had it a year or two later, when Chute appeared on the stage as an actor on the occasion of one of his annual benefits, and I had to notice his performance. By thus appearing on the boards of his own theatre, he challenged criticism. It was for me a tempting opportunity, for with his "fair round belly" and huge frame of Falstaff, he elected to play the light and mercurial Mercutio. There was scope for ridicule, for irony, for all the notes in the gamut of criticism, and my fingers itched to be at it. But what Buzfuz would have called my "better nature" prevailed, and I wrote a notice that gave no cause for cavil. What I said was this: "Mr. J. H. Chute returned last night to the glimpses of the footlights, playing Mercutio for the first time for many years. It was in all respects an interesting performance, and if not so agile as that of much younger men, had all the polish of experience. In fact, Mr. Chute lent great weight to the part." Yes, about twenty stone.

My knowledge of music was small; in fact I knew nothing at all about music, and had often to depend upon the information of the instrumentalists themselves for technical details of their work. It was fairly plain sailing when I had to describe the effect produced by a Titiens or a Christine Nilsson, but when it came to dealing with orchestral performances I was in deep waters, and on one occasion I wrote that Signor So-and-so

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“played admirably on the violin obligato.” After that shocking “bloomer,” of which I did not hear the last for a long time, I was wisely restricted to the more descriptive side of musical reporting. This gave me opportunities of hearing, in addition to the vocalists I have named, Sims Reeves at his zenith, Mario in his decline, Adelina Patti, her sister Carlotta, Foli, Lemmens-Sherrington, Sinico, Madame Patey and many other world-renowned artists. Also of being present at several of the annual Ladies’ Nights of the Bristol and Clifton Madrigal Society, whose concerts of unaccompanied part-singing by male voices only were of the most delightful character.

A word about Sims Reeves, which, as I have admitted that I know nothing about music, must be taken for what it is worth. He was equally great in the “Messiah” and “The Beggars’ Opera,” in “Sound an Alarm” and “Tom Bowling.” As most people know, he was somewhat erratic in fulfilling his engagements, due to a very susceptible larynx, but there were ill-natured gossips who passed round the slander that he was too fond of brandy. Once when he failed to put in an appearance at the Victoria Rooms, although it was known that he had arrived in Clifton, this explanation was hinted at in a local publication of inferior standing. Next morning I called at his hotel and sent in my card with a request to see the famous tenor. At first he wished to be excused, but when I told Mrs. Reeves

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that the object of my visit was to refute a calumny, he consented. That his indisposition was genuine, and the nature of it a relaxed throat, there could be no sort of doubt. I had a fairly long chat with him, and he told me that slanderous tongues had persecuted him for years, that the slander had mostly taken shape in accusations of intemperance, and that all such statements in whatsoever degree were unmitigated and malicious lies. At his request I drafted what I proposed to say in print, but after further consideration he begged me, on the principle, I suppose, of *qui s'excuse s'accuse*, not to make any reference to the rumour, but to confine my paragraph to a simple statement of fact about his throat, confirmed by his physician's bulletin.

I don't know if Reeves bore me any malice for having assumed that the Bristol public needed reassurance on this very delicate subject; but when, a year or so after, I met him at a private social function he was less urbane in manner. The occasion was a supper given, after a concert, by one of his influential admirers, and following supper there was music. Reeves himself, having previously sung at the concert, and responded to several encores, was neither asked nor expected to fatigue himself farther, and there was plenty of instrumental talent to fill up gaps if the conversation showed signs of flagging. Now, it is well understood that ignorance of a subject is no bar to its profession, and a lack of elementary



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knowledge of music does not prevent rash novices from attempting to sing. I, for example, although not knowing a breve from a semi-quaver, had occasionally warbled at cricketing dinners, and, with the self-sufficiency of youth, “fancied myself.” So, when the hostess asked me, as a matter of form, to sing, and expected me, equally of course, to make an excuse, I was quite ready and willing to furnish one more illustration of the Shakespearean dictum, “Wrens make play where eagles fear to perch.” I should be happy, I said. What would I sing? I thought I would try “My Pretty Jane.” Tableau! My hostess in her consternation nearly fell to the floor. It was Mr. Reeves’s song, she whispered, with a quaking note in her voice. I knew that it was, but suppose I must have thought the selection would, on that account, lend greater glory to my achievement. Perhaps the champagne at supper had something to do with it. At any rate, gentle dissuasion did not move me; it was to be “My Pretty Jane” or nothing, and it was not going to be nothing.

My hostess ought to have flatly refused to humour my preposterous impudence. On the contrary—perhaps with a spice of malice—she let me have my way, and proceeded to sit down to the piano. When the opening bars of the accompaniment were heard there came from the remoter parts of the large double drawing-room a burst of applause, the impression being that Mr. Reeves had graciously consented to sing; but



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when the applauders realised that they had to listen to the harsh notes of a jay in borrowed plumes they looked angrily at one another, and still more angrily at me. I must have possessed plenty of *aplomb*, for I sang the song right through, and, amidst some ironical handclapping, went back to my seat. For a few seconds there was silence. Then Mr. Reeves rose in his place, walked very deliberately across the room, stood in front of me, and made a profound mock obeisance. "Mr. Jennings, I think?" he said. "Well, Mr. Jennings, I have heard many people attempt to sing that song, I have often attempted to sing it myself, but in all my experience I never knew any one who"—a pause—"so carefully avoided the tune as you have done." It was what pugilists call a "facer." I had no retort ready. I could only smile a sickly smile and try to look unconcerned. It may be guessed, though, that I did not altogether enjoy the rest of the evening. Perhaps it may help to re-establish my reputation for sanity if I add that I have "avoided the tune" ever since. So far as music is concerned, Jane and I are not on speaking terms. The last time I heard the air was on one of MacBrayne's steamers in the Kyles of Bute. The weather was calm, and I am a good sailor, but—something upset me.

## CHAPTER VII

Sanitary investigations—A great theatre disaster—"On the busk"—The Histrionic Club—A ruined career—A Birmingham editorship—The defects of a Bristol training.

I HAVE perhaps laid too much stress on these lighter duties and thereby conveyed the impression that I was seldom or never engaged upon serious work. This would be a wrong impression. I wrote a good many special articles in support of hospitals, reformatories, industrial schools, and the prevention of disease and crime, receiving great encouragement from Miss Mary Carpenter and other local philanthropists. I investigated for the paper the causes of two epidemics, one of typhoid fever in the St. Philip's district of the city, and the other of Asiatic cholera at Pill, a village at the mouth of the Avon, famous for its race of Channel pilots. A description of the insanitary conditions then prevailing sounds incredible to-day. In most of the stricken tenements there was no drainage at all, the cesspools were choked with corruption, and people living five and six in a room were poisoned with fœtid and germ-laden air. A worse state of affairs was discovered at Pill when the cholera broke out

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there. Many of the houses backed on to a small open stream, more like a ditch, running down to the river. *Into* this stream was poured all the refuse and offensive matter from the houses; *from* this stream the inhabitants drew the only water they had to drink. The Bristol Board of Health sent down as special medical inspector Dr. Tibbits, who gave me much help, and the published results of our combined inquiries, which appeared in the *Press*, and caused something of a sensation, resulted in sweeping and permanent reforms, while, thanks to the precautionary measures taken, the cholera did not, on that occasion, get a footing in Bristol.

One Boxing night, towards the close of my service on the *Press*, I had an agitating experience. I was at the Victoria Rooms reporting a concert when, during the interval, a messenger from the office, breathless and flustered, was allowed to come into the hall and make a communication to me. It was to the effect that there had been a terrible accident at the New Theatre in Park Row, and my instructions were to leave the concert and devote all my energies to the more urgent call. It took me a very short time in a cab to reach the theatre, where I found that the rumours were not at all exaggerated. A big pantomime crowd had collected before the doors were opened, and that portion of it making for the pit entrance had to congregate in a passage on the decline from the street, and forming in the circumstances

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a *cul de sac*. The more the people pressed behind the more densely wedged together were those at the bottom of the slope. Women began to scream, men to struggle, but there was no relief from the suffocating pressure, and when after some delay the pit door was opened, and those who retained consciousness were able to push their way through, an awful spectacle was revealed. The ground was strewn with bodies, a number of them past all aid, and many others almost at the last gasp. As soon as the police could get to work they cleared the passage, sent for doctors, and by the direction of the management advised late comers to go away, as the house was full.

When I arrived on the scene seventeen bodies, mostly of people not above middle age, were laid out in a ghastly row in one of the theatre lobbies. Their faces wore that look of agony which often accompanies death by suffocation. The breath had been literally squeezed out of them, and to that room of death there floated continual roars of laughter and the noise of applause. Comedy was jostling tragedy; folly with cap and bells was making merry only a few yards from the improvised dead-house with its seventeen silent victims who would never laugh any more.

It had been discussed whether it was wiser to go on with the performance, or to run the risk of a panic by announcing the facts and distressing

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the audience, and the decision was in favour of the former course. Its propriety need not be debated now. Every one in the theatre, including the members of the Company, was studiously kept in the dark; the Merryandrews of the show did not know that they were such near neighbours of grim death, and the audience, ignorant even of the rumour of disaster, gave themselves up in a holiday humour to the frivolities of the occasion. Not until the curtain was rung down on Harlequin's last pirouette and the theatre was given up to the night and darkness did the whisper go round that there had been an accident.

My duties were to collect all the information I could, get back to the office, and write a narrative. It was nearly midnight when I finished a two-column story, and then I went to a well-known tavern resorted to by reporters, and there in a crowded smoking-room described all the gruesome details again. It must have been an hour later when, over-excited, I went home to bed. But not to sleep. That row of bodies was before my eyes, open or closed, until the dawn crept up and tired nature gave in.

Young men occasionally do foolish things. One night George Rignold (who was temporarily out of the theatre bill) invited me to join him in a madcap street-singing expedition, and as I had no newspaper engagement, I agreed. In the classic language of Bohemia, this is called "going on the busk." It was a cold, frosty night, and the



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snow was on the ground, when, fortified with egg and sherry, we started off to serenade the homes of respectability at Cotham. We had no instrument, and George's programme of "Pour out the Rhine Wine" and "The Tempest of the Heart" was somewhat ineffective without an accompaniment. My duties were to "keep back the crowd" and "collect the money." It was as great a sinecure as being in a Government office. One small boy constituted the "crowd," and as for money—it was scarcer than green peas in December. Personal application at the biggest houses, and an intimation in suave tones that the vocalist had a sick wife and a colony of starving children, was received with frigid hauteur and hastily-closed doors. One nervous housemaid handed two pennies over the door-chain, and that was the financial sum total of our joint efforts. As the egg and sherry had cost us five shillings there was a net loss of four and tenpence. I blamed George for the unattractiveness of his programme, and he blamed me for the unpersuasiveness of my appeals. "Busking" has never since suggested itself to me as a reliable source of income. The unproductive character of our entertainment nevertheless furnished material for an article which the editor of the *Press* was pleased to print, so that the night's escapade was not altogether without its uses.

The ability to write an article has more than once got me out of a tight corner. If discovered

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in a den of thieves, the reporter can always say that he is "studying life," or "collecting material for copy." If he wants to paint true pictures he must see things with his own eyes. I was once one of a party of raided gamblers, but my notebook, with a number of memoranda evidently intended for working-up, saved me. As a matter of fact, I went to the place to see and not to play, but who would have believed that story if I had not taken a few furtive notes of the proceedings?

One more passing reference to the Bristol Histrionic Club. We arranged one summer to hold a Fancy Fair, with all sorts of side-shows, for the benefit of the National Lifeboat Institution. It was heralded by a procession in costume early in the day through the principal streets of Bristol and Clifton. In that procession I personated a clown and, dressed in motley, rode on a bare-backed steed (by the way, is it permissible to call a donkey a "steed"? It sounds better) in the showy cavalcade. In the fair grounds there was a theatre for potted melodrama, where "The Rosebud of Stinging-Nettle Farm" was performed in fifteen minutes. There was also a burlesque circus with two-legged pasteboard horses which caracoled with graceful display at the behests of their "riders." My jokes in the ring (we had real sawdust) were what may be described as old-crusted impromptus; they owed something to the wit of the professional jesters. Now and

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then, in the midst of our antics, it occurred to me that a raddled face and a patchwork costume were hardly compatible with the dignity of the Press; but it was all for charity, and one may forgive oneself for playing the fool when it is done in a good cause.

One of the performers at the Fancy Fair was a good-looking young tenor vocalist. He was made up with a wig and a false moustache to imitate Sims Reeves, and was well applauded both for his facial and vocal success. Great things were predicted of his future. Up to a point he justified this early promise, obtained good engagements on the stage, acted with success in London, married a clever young actress who is still alive, but when he had the ball at his feet he succumbed to a hereditary failing and went swiftly down the Avernine slope to utter loss of self-control and beggary. But for that failing he might have reached almost any position on the comedy stage. The last time I ever saw him was in Birmingham many years later. He was then stranded and penniless, and I doubt if the bit of gold I gave him for old times' sake did him any good. He has long passed from the scenes of his failure, and it is kinder not to mention his name, but some old Bristolians who remember him in his golden prime will know whose picture it is.

In the summer of 1870, when the Franco-Prussian War broke out, I had been on the *Western Daily Press* for six years, I had been married for

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over a year, and I had a baby three months old. It seemed to me that as far as the material question of income was concerned I was standing still. There was no opening on the paper, or likely to be, for a step up the ladder involving better pay. In plain English, I was getting discontented. When, therefore, I saw an advertisement to the effect that an editor was wanted for an evening paper about to be started in the Midlands, I made an application, narrating my experience and sending a few specimens of my work. In a short time I had a letter saying that the proposed paper was to be brought out in Birmingham by the proprietors of the powerful *Daily Post*, and requesting me to go and see them. The journey was duly made, the interview took place, and the post was offered to me at a salary of sixty-five shillings a week—exactly the same as I was getting in Bristol; with the assurance that if the paper turned out a commercial success I should benefit accordingly—a promise which I am bound to say was honourably kept. It did not take me long to consider and accept the offer. It was a risky venture, because I had had no editorial experience and was throwing up a certainty for an uncertainty; but it was, I think, a riskier venture for the proprietors, who were not only launching a ship, but were putting in command a young man ignorant of the first principles of navigation. The name of the newspaper was the *Birmingham Daily Mail*, and during eighteen years from October



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1870 my fortunes were intimately bound up in it.

Before I close these Bristol reminiscences I am compelled to admit that that ancient and historic city was not a good school of journalism as journalism is understood to-day. The measure of merit was not quality, but quantity. The paper that brought out the longest report of an event was considered, in newspaper circles, to have "scored." A competition in verbosity does not encourage a literary style; it puts a premium on platitude and makes redundancy rank as a virtue. I sometimes tried to combat this custom by venturing into light and humorous description, but the next morning all the conceit was knocked out of me by the editorial dictum, "The *Post* has a quarter of a column more than we have." Those were times when it did not pay to call a horse anything less polysyllabic than an "equine quadruped," when a fire became the "devouring element," and when—to steal an old circus wheeze—a man did not ask his friend for a pinch of snuff, but said to him, "Permit me to insert the summits of my digits into your pulveriferous receptacle that I may extract therefrom some nicotian particles wherewith to titillate my olfactory organ." Nowadays the sub-editor's relentless blue pencil curbs the fecundity of the writer whose sole aim it is to fill space. Brevity is the chief desideratum. The wordy narrator soon finds himself elbowed out by rivals who can put into a few pithy



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sentences what he cannot say in less than half a column.

This is the only complaint I have to make of my Bristol training. It took me some years to get out of the habit of prolixity; indeed, I am not sure that I have got out of it yet.

## CHAPTER VIII

A bold venture—The “Daily Liar”—The Prince of Wales’s illness—An impudent proposal—I meet Arthur Orton, the Tichborne claimant—Dr. Kenealy’s indiscretions—The Odium Politicum—The Birmingham Caucus—Mr. Schnadhorst.

LOOKING back, I find that my intellectual equipment for an editor’s chair left a great deal to be desired. I had done considerable miscellaneous reading, but it had been chiefly in the literature of the past. With Pope’s and Byron’s works I was thoroughly familiar, though my knowledge of Shakespeare was almost limited to the scenes I had had to learn in my Blaenavon adventure, and to the passages made familiar in recitations and books of quotations. Of modern literature, particularly of modern fiction, I knew but little. I had read only some of Dickens’s books and none of Thackeray’s, none of George Eliot’s. Of the great movements in modern thought, even of the Tractarian controversies and their issue, I knew no more than the average schoolboy. Youth is fortunately unconscious of its limitations, otherwise progress would come to a standstill. I took the editorial ribbons in hand with as much confidence as if I had been on the box-seat all my life, and proceeded forthwith to instruct the

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people of Birmingham *ex cathedrâ* every afternoon on all that concerned their moral, political and physical welfare.

The *Mail*, as I have said, was started soon after the breaking out of the Franco-Prussian War; and for the duration of that struggle, also when the excesses of the Paris Commune were horrifying people much as the excesses of the Russian Bolsheviks have horrified them later, our contents-bills did not err on the side of reticence. Some staid and sober townsfolk—political opponents, of course—called us the “Daily Liar” because we printed the often exaggerated war telegrams just as they were received; and one worthy alderman, if any one dared to take a copy of the *Mail* (“rag,” he called it) into his house, ostentatiously seized it with a pair of tongs and deposited it as an unclean thing outside his back-door. Still, we were not always playing to the gallery. Now and then, unlike Laureate Shadwell, we did “deviate into sense.” For some years, though, we had to cater principally for a street sale—for all I know it may be so now—and a street sale requires the stimulant of some rousing announcement or equally rousing query. Any evening newspaper that issued a contents-bill with the suggestive question: “Who killed Cock Robin?” in very large type, would command a huge sale. On this principle, our best efforts were put forth to excite wonder and stimulate curiosity.

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There were occasions, however, when the gravity of the news forbade any but the simplest terms. One such was the dangerous illness of the Prince of Wales in December 1871. But the restrained language of the bills was no index to the agitated preparations in the office. The *Birmingham Mail*, in common, no doubt, with every daily newspaper in the Empire, was anxiously awaiting the successive bulletins of H.R.H.'s condition. At one time these looked very ominous. Our office was then in Crooked Lane; it was cold, draughty, and uncomfortable, yet for three or four days we were there, editor, compositors and machine-men, from eight in the morning until twelve or one at night, ready to bring out at short notice an edition recording any important change. When the Prince's case seemed hopeless, and the worst was looked upon as a calamitous certainty, a biography and a leader were set up in type, and every column of the four pages was outlined with heavy black "rules" in readiness for the expected news of his death. Happily, when things looked blackest, there was a turn for the better, which grew into a steady recovery.

Not long after the Prince had been pronounced out of danger, a very curious letter was addressed to the editor by the proprietor of a well-known publication. As nearly half a century has passed since it was written, the "Strictly private and confidential" may be ignored. The letter ran as follows—

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“DEAR SIR,

“It is believed that the majority of British journals had, during the recent crisis, leaders in type, or at least in MS., prepared on the assumption that H.R.H. the Prince of Wales would not recover. The publication of these in book form, though perhaps unusual, would be a remarkable evidence of the affectionate regard in which he is held by those who, it is now probable, will one day be his subjects. I and some business friends are prepared to undertake such publication if we can get a sufficiently representative body of material. May I ask you if you are willing to supply me with a proof of the leading article which you proposed to use, which I shall gladly print in full, and feel sure that it will be appreciated by a great number of loyal readers?

“Yours sincerely,  
“\_\_\_\_\_”

The proprietors of the paper agreed with me that the request could not be complied with, and I fancy this must have been the result generally, for I never heard anything more of the matter, and the book never appeared.

Before the civil action in which he was non-suited the Tichborne claimant visited Birmingham with the object of enlisting sympathy and raising money on the so-called Tichborne bonds. He put up at an hotel in High Street, and gave receptions to all who chose to attend them. He was a curious figure, fat, coarse and overdressed, with patent-leather boots and lemon-coloured kid gloves. It is not impossible, of course, for an



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aristocrat to be gross and fleshy, and it is conceivable that Roger Tichborne might, during an adventurous knock-about life, have developed into a "mountain of flesh"; but it is not conceivable that an educated youth, as Roger was, would ever have forgotten that "we was" is not grammar. The claimant used this form more than once in my hearing, and from that time I never wavered in my belief that he was an impostor. The amazing thing was that he deceived Roger's own mother.

No one who was not a contemporary can form any idea of the interest taken in the claim and the excitement it caused. The nation was divided into two camps, pro- and anti-claimant, and hardly any other topic was discussed in public or private. The litigation arising out of it lasted an unconscionable time and cost unconscionable sums of money. My duties in Birmingham did not allow of my hearing much of either the civil or the criminal trial; but I did contrive to be present for a couple of days during Coleridge's patient and searching cross-examination in the first case, and during one of Dr. Kenealy's fiery outbursts in the second; also when Castro, *alias* Orton, was sentenced to fourteen years' penal servitude for perjury and forgery. Dr. Kenealy lost his head in his zeal for his client, and was disbarred for his behaviour to the judges, whereupon his paper, called the *Englishman*, became more violent than ever, and continued its dis-

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graceful attacks upon Lord Chief Justice Cockburn. Disgusted with this abuse of the freedom of the Press, the *Mail* criticised Kenealy in something of his own hard-hitting manner; and this elicited from him a rejoinder, not in his own paper, but in an abusive letter to the editor of the *Mail*, denouncing the latter as corrupt and time-serving and a disgrace to journalism. The kettle did not even simmer under this defamation by the pot.

Birmingham in that day was nothing if not political. I think it was Mr. Bright who said that it was as Liberal as the sea is salt. The Liberals did not, however, have everything their own way. Soon after the *Mail* was started, the conflicting views on the practical application of the new Education Act resulted in a religious war of words. Nonconformists and Churchmen were girding at each other about denominational education in rate-aided schools. It is an old story now, and not worth re-telling here. But the feud was only a phase of the acute party feeling that prevailed then and for fifteen or sixteen years after. Now, in my heart of hearts I have never been much of a party man. I have never had those strong political convictions that prevent one from ever saying that his side may be sometimes in the wrong, or from recognising that the other side may sometimes be in the right. When I undertook the editorship I understood that the *Mail* was expected in politics to say "ditto" to the *Post*, and, in the absence of

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any fixed and definite opinions of my own, I was prepared, as a barrister might be, to do my best for the client who had briefed me. As a general rule, I went by my brief, and blazed away with adjectival fervour against those dreadfully wicked Churchmen and Tories. Once or twice I took an independent line, but the action had disagreeable consequences and threatened to be sacrificial.

For during the latter 'seventies, the Liberal Caucus was at the height of its power. The Caucus was the machine by which the political decrees of a few in authority were made to appear the spontaneous will of the Liberal party. One's soul was hardly one's own. The Caucus dominated municipal as well as imperial politics. Once a policy had been agreed upon in the inner circle, it had to be the creed of the Liberal party. It was a Gessler's cap to which all must bow down. Every member of the party had to subscribe to it, shout for it and vote for it, or be banished from its councils and henceforth cold-shouldered. The Caucus always seemed to me to be a good illustration of Dundreary's saying about the tail wagging the dog. And what a remarkably docile dog it was! Most of what was done under its rule may have been good for the town and its people, but none the less was it inconsistent with the freedom of opinion which is the essence of true Liberalism. And I should like to put it on record that the principal characteristic of party Liberalism then, whatever it may be now, was

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illiberalism. The orthodox Dissenters who formed an important part of its rank and file, while noisily claiming freedom of opinion for themselves, were bitter opponents of freedom of opinion in others. Their views of conduct and morality must be enforced on all; what they disapproved of must be made illegal; in short, they compounded for the errors and prejudices they were inclined to, "by damning those they had no mind to."

The docility of Liberals was exemplified in the notorious "Vote as you're told" contest. In order to ensure success in all the electoral divisions, Liberal voters were instructed to put their crosses, not against the candidates they personally favoured, but against those assigned to them by the Association's decree. Individual responsibility was disregarded, the voters were treated like the units in an army, and told to carry out the orders of headquarters whether they liked them or not. The plan had its defenders. I believe the great majority of the Liberal electors fell in with it willingly and cheerfully. It was the extinction of private judgment in the interests of the "cause," and the end was considered to justify the means.

But it was typical of the way in which the party was disciplined and dragooned. The "Four Hundred," and later the "Six Hundred," were mere machines to give effect to a pre-arranged policy. I was myself a member of these so-called



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committees, but by whom nominated and how elected, I never knew. There was not, so far as I observed, any manifestation of independent thought, at all events until Home Rule split the great organisation in twain. A local wag, parodying Byron, summed up things thus—

“Of the Six Hundred, only three  
Suffice to rule our destiny.”

Mr. Schnadhorst, the Liberal Association secretary, was nominally the chief engineer of the Caucus, but in reality it was Mr. Joseph Chamberlain who pulled the strings. Schnadhorst was the Chief Secretary of the Birmingham Liberal Association and the general supervisor of Liberal organisations throughout the Midlands. He was a man little above middle age. The dome of his head was quite bald, and although his upper lip and chin were close-shaven, he wore bushy side-whiskers in the fashion that used to be known as “weepers.” He was a fluent speaker, with a soft, purring voice, and a manner that was a curious blend of confident self-opinion and deprecatory humility. Before becoming officially mixed up with politics, he was, I believe, a dissenting minister, and there was always a suggestion of the “tea-meeting” platform about his little speeches at the divisional committees, emphasised by the continual “washing of his hands with invisible soap.”

His Liberalism, as may be gathered from the



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nature of his former calling, was of the narrow type, but its very narrowness was its strength. According to his lights he served his party well, and it must have been a cruel blow to him when, a few years later, the Chamberlain revolt smashed up an organisation which it had taken years to perfect.

For all his suaveness of manner, he was capable of bitterness and anger. I remember calling on him once, when Home Rulers and Unionists were in the very crisis of the fray, to show him a marked passage in a newspaper and ascertain if the statement in it was accurate. The editor of the *Daily Mail* was not a welcome guest. We had been active in the anti-Gladstone campaign. We had helped, in our little way, to disintegrate the party. Schnadhorst was boiling over with fury even before he knew the purport of my visit. He snatched the paper from my hands, thinking perhaps that it was the offending *Mall*, threw it on the floor and stamped upon it, his face being contorted with passion. And the terms of abuse he used! The epithets of scorn that literally foamed from his mouth! It was not a dignified exhibition, but some excuse may be found in the fact that Schnadhorst was overworked, neurasthenic, and smarting under a sense of what he considered to be a perfidious betrayal.

It was the last time I ever spoke to him, and I could have wished that that last time were a pleasanter memory.

## CHAPTER IX

“ Joe ” Chamberlain—A libel action—Differences with a pugilist  
—John Bright—Express reporting—My dull reporter—  
Bright thanks the *Mail*—Stories of the “ People’s Tribune ”  
—How a pun was received—A duplicated newspaper article.

WHEN I went to Birmingham Mr. Chamberlain was already something more than a local celebrity. He was a prime favourite with the townspeople, who thoroughly enjoyed his hard-hitting speeches, freely spiced with funny American stories. Everybody spoke of him as “ Joe.” His election to the Town Council a year or two afterwards was a challenge to the old gang of aldermen who met nightly at the Woodman Inn, in Easy Row, and over long pipes and tankards discussed the town’s government, and reached conclusions that were afterwards formally adopted in the Council Chamber. In the Easy Row Parliament, as it was called, were really decided the vital matters that affected the ratepayers. Mr. Chamberlain and a number of his friends, desirous of putting local government on a higher plane, came down on the “ old gang ” like wolves on the fold by contesting a number of seats at the November ward elections. Several of the occupants were defeated, and a new era was inaugurated.

The *Mail* had a share in the fray. It reserved

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its most pointed shafts for one of the ruling aldermen who was hoping to get a majority in the Council that would elect him to the mayoralty. One morning the Conservative daily paper—which supported his candidature, by the way—reported an incident the point of which was, that he had made use, on some public occasion, of the vulgar if expressive phrase, “S’welp me, G—.” A day or two later it announced upon authority that the phrase had not been uttered; whereupon the *Mail*, snapping at the opportunity, printed a paragraph repeating the contradiction and assuring its readers that “by no manner of means would the worthy alderman have used such language as ‘S’welp me, G—.’ ” Some ironical intent must have been suspected in this professedly sympathetic comment, for we were promptly served with a writ for libel. In due course the cause was tried at Westminster before Chief Baron Fitzroy Kelly, Huddleston, Q.C., leading for the plaintiff, and Day, Q.C., and A. L. Smith appearing for the defendant. It did not take long to dispose of. His lordship was evidently of opinion that the *Mail’s* facetiousness, of which other examples were quoted, held the ambitious alderman up to ridicule and had been the means of excluding him from the mayoral chair, and thereby doing him an injury. In the end the jury found for the plaintiff with small damages. I was present at the trial, but was not called. After I had had a hearty lunch in company with the paper’s solicitor,

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I drove off to Cremorne, where I received a painful shock by seeing poor De Groof, the Flying Man, killed by a smash of his apparatus a few yards in front of the cab.

On only one other occasion have I had to appear as a defendant in the courts. There lived in one of the outer districts of Birmingham a publican named Morris Roberts. He was also an ex-prize-fighter. At the back of his licensed premises he kept a few wild animals in cages, which he was pleased to call a menagerie. I paid a visit to the show, and noted that the hyæna and the bear, which with a small elephant were the chief attractions, had the appearance of having been severely rationed. One morning news was brought to the *Matt* that the elephant had broken bounds during the night and had explored the neighbouring gardens in search of forage. This naturally formed the substance of a paragraph, the writer of which ungraciously insinuated that as the animals could not get enough to eat at home they were forced to the naughty necessity of wandering outside for what they might pick up. This made Morris Roberts angry. Considering his antecedents he ought to have punched my head, but no doubt thought it would be a better advertisement for his scrappy little "Zoo" to summon me at the local police court on a charge of using language calculated to cause a breach of the peace. Mr. Alfred Young, barrister, who defended, laughed the case out of court. His

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picture of the roaming elephant gathering a cabbage here and a geranium there caused much laughter, and in the end the stipendiary dismissed the summons on the ground that there was nothing exceeding fair criticism in the paragraph.

Reverting to politics. When John Bright addressed his Birmingham constituents (in 1873) for the first time after his long illness, it occurred to me that it would be a smart piece of journalism to bring out a full report of his speech the same night. This necessitated the temporary assistance of the *Daily Post* reporting staff (we then had only one or two reporters on the *Mail*), and the employment of relays of messengers to carry the copy from Bingley Hall to the printing-office. What is a common enough undertaking to-day was then a novelty, and the whole plan had to be mapped out, and the reporters' "turns" carefully numbered and timed to prevent gaps or overlappings. Everything worked out satisfactorily, and before the meeting came to an end a copy of the *Mail* containing a verbatim report of his speech was handed up to Mr. Bright on the platform. The closing passages of that speech were charged with a personal note that visibly affected the vast and sympathetic audience. "For my share," he said, "looking back for these forty years, I feel some sense of content, but it does not in the least lessen, it rather adds to and strengthens, my hope for the future. The history of the last forty years of this country—judging



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it fairly—is as regards its legislation mainly the history of the conquests of freedom. It will be a great volume that tells the story, and your name and mine, if I mistake not, will be found on some of its pages. For me the final chapter is now writing—it may be already written—but for you, this great constituency, there is a perpetual youth and a perpetual future. I pray Heaven that in the years to come, and when my voice is hushed, you may be granted strength and moderation and wisdom to influence the councils of your country by righteous means to none other than to noble and righteous ends.” Mr. Bright’s voice was not, however, to be hushed until sixteen years later. In 1883, his twenty-five years’ connexion with Birmingham as one of its parliamentary representatives was celebrated by a procession through five miles of streets and a great demonstration at Bingley Hall.

It is sad to have to record that on a later occasion, when we again attempted a special night edition it turned out a miserable fiasco. There are always some fussy people who cannot let well alone, and the chief reporter of the *Post* was one of them. He was distressed because in the rush of publication some misprints had occurred, and Mr. Bright’s reference to “the dismemberment of Turkey” had unseasonably read “the dismemberment of turkey”; also “course of action” had become transformed into “cross occasion.” So when Mr. Bright next gave an address, and the

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special late edition was decided upon, the chief reporter, in order to prevent typographical mishaps, decided to take a check-note by which the proofs were to be corrected. So conscientiously did he perform his meticulous duty that he kept the formes waiting for nearly two hours while his corrections were being made, and the meeting had broken up and gone home to bed long before a handful of belated newsboys were shouting: "Full report of Mr. Bright's speech" to the deserted streets.

It was an annoying business, but one result was that a check-note was never again attempted in my time. Speakers who were considered of sufficient importance to justify a midnight edition had to take the risk of some weird perversions of their actual utterances.

When the *Mail* had made enough headway to justify a larger reporting staff of our own it was not an easy matter to find suitable men. There were plenty of good shorthand writers, but very few who could turn out a neat paragraph. One young gentleman in particular gave me a lot of trouble. Everything he wrote was so confused as to be unintelligible and had to be rewritten by some one else. No amount of advice seemed to do him any good, and if he tried to improve, the improvement did not make itself evident. At last I had to speak seriously to him. "Look here, Con," I said when he had submitted a paragraph of which I could make no sense,

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“you must really do better. Now just you take this back and imagine that you have sitting in front of you the stupidest man in the kingdom; then tell him, in the simplest and clearest way you can, what you want to put in the paragraph, and when you think you have made him understand write down as nearly as possible what you said to him.” He went away rather sadly, and after half an hour or so came back with his “copy.” I read it, and to my satisfaction found it was just what I wanted, a plain, straightforward statement of facts. “Capital!” I said. “This will do. Now tell me how you managed to do it.” “Well, sir,” he replied, “I did what you told me. I sat down at the desk and fancied that you were sitting opposite me.”

And I had put him down for a dull dog!

I may perhaps say here that Mr. Bright in the later years of his career seldom reached those heights of simple but fervid eloquence by which he had made his world-wide reputation as an orator. There was, however, one occasion upon which he spoke in the Town Hall with the fierce denunciatory passion of a Hebrew prophet, making a profound impression, not only upon those who heard him, but also on those, whether of his own inclining or not, who read his speech the next day. In a leader I wrote upon this powerful outburst I expressed in unstinted terms, and with profound sincerity, my admiration of a wisdom so nobly and beautifully phrased, and this comment so

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gratified "the old man eloquent" that he called at the office personally to thank me.

"Well," said Mr. Bright, "you fired off some big guns this afternoon."

"Only a faint echo of your own, Mr. Bright," I replied.

"I must thank you for your good opinions. We public men are supposed to be indifferent to praise or blame, but no one can be really indifferent to kind words honestly meant. I think the older one gets the more the kind words count for. Praise is a stimulant in youth, but it is a solace in old age."

I met Mr. Bright at dinners on several occasions, one of them being a small party at the house of one of the proprietors of the *Mall*. After dinner we adjourned to the billiards-room. Mr. Bright was a fair average player, and I was a very poor one, so that his victory over me in a couple of games was no glory for him, though it was an honour for me to be beaten by him. Throughout the games, and during others, he smoked. He was an excellent judge of a good cigar and thoroughly enjoyed it. Mr. Chamberlain was another devotee of my Lady Nicotine, if that is the name of the lady who presides over the fortunes of Havana tobacco. The library in his house, called Highbury, near Birmingham, contained a series of drawers full of choice cigars in various stages of maturing. In that room I once heard a great duologue between these representatives of the Old Liberalism and

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the New. It was prolonged, animated and sometimes pointed, and of the dozen or more present not one ventured to break in on that contest of controversial giants.

In the course of the conversation that went on during the game of billiards just referred to, I led up to the subject of public speaking, and asked Mr. Bright what advice he would give to any one desirous of improving himself in that art. "Well," he replied, "the first thing he must do is to express himself clearly, and for him to speak clearly he must think clearly. He must know exactly what it is that he wishes to tell his audience and how it must be arranged so as to lead naturally to his conclusions. Everything depends upon lucidity," and here Mr. Bright, parodying Danton, repeated "lucidity" twice. "What are your own methods, Mr. Bright, with regard to arrangement?" I ventured to ask him. "I put down the stages of the argument"—I give his words as nearly as I can remember them—"on a piece of paper. These are the objectives to be reached one by one and in due order, and I keep the paper in front of me when speaking. I call the stages 'islands' and my aim is to swim, so to speak, first to island No. 1, then from island No. 1 to island No. 2, and so on. As I have previously thought out the line of reasoning by which I am to make these journeys the language comes naturally. All I try to do is to make it clear and convincing."



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That Mr. Bright did frame his speeches in this way I know by MS. notes of his that at one time or another came into my hands straight from the platform. These notes never took up more than two or three half-sheets of notepaper, one of which was occupied with the exact wording of his concluding sentences, or peroration, if a word may be used that seems to connote something more elaborate in structure than the simplicity of Mr. Bright's *ars celare artem*. His concluding sentences were always carefully prepared and committed to memory, and he spoke them with all the solemn earnestness of impromptu utterance as distinct from rehearsed declamation.

I once asked Mr. Bright if he remembered what impression Tennyson's *Maud* had made upon him when it was published somewhere about the close of the Crimean War. Tennyson, it is well known, repudiated any personal allusion, and denied that the bellicose sentiments put into the mouth of the supposed narrator were necessarily his own. Mr. Bright only went so far as to say that one of the most criticised passages drew "an unfortunate parallel." The "broad-brimm'd hawker of holy things" was obviously a Quaker; "whose ear is stuffed with his cotton" indicated his calling; and the rest of the passage described his disapproval of war. Mr. Bright was a Quaker, his business interests were in cotton, he was a peace man; most people, indeed, would have said a peace-at-any-price man.

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“ I won’t say Tennyson meant me,” said Mr. Bright, “ but he must have had some one in his mind very like me. It is what you may call a literary coincidence, I suppose,” and there was a curious little gleam in his eye as he said it.

A look of Mr. Bright’s lingers yet in my recollection; I can see it now—a severe, strong stare. The occasion was a supper at the house of Mr. Arthur Chamberlain after a big public meeting. The supper was being eaten to the accompaniment of chatter and laughter, when Mr. Bright, on being pressed to partake of a tempting dish, excused himself on the ground that he might not be able to digest it. Amongst the company was a certain facetious alderman with a propensity for making puns. He had been evidently waiting for an opportunity to display his verbal dexterity—nursing his wit, so to speak, “ to keep it warm ”—when Mr. Bright’s refusal of the dish unfortunately gave him a chance. “ But surely, Mr. Bright,” he said, “ you don’t want to *die just* yet.”

No “ helpless laughter echoed to the jest.” There was not even the ghost of a smile on a single face. Just an awkward silence, and Mr. Bright’s freezing and astonished gaze at the offender! After a few seconds of suspense, a ready-witted guest discovered that the weather as a topic of conversation was being neglected, and we got back once more to a flow—a forced flow—of commonplace. But there were no more puns, Mr. Bright’s interrogator was stricken dumb.

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All his audacity had disappeared; he was as limp and crestfallen as the Jackdaw of Rheims after the Cardinal's curse. He went, speechless, through the remainder of the meal, he puffed laboriously at a cigar afterwards, but it might have been said of him, as it was of Abner Dean of Angel's, that "the subsequent proceedings interested him no more."

After that, it may surprise some people to learn that Mr. Bright once very nearly perpetrated a pun himself. It was at a time when Russian activities in Asia were a topic of conversation at every political gathering, and the policy of the British (Conservative) Government was much discussed. On the occasion to which I refer there had been a good deal of after-dinner talk about Russia, and with the object of focussing the desultory opinions on a definite point, some one put the question to the table: "What, then, ought to be the Government's policy in Asia?" Mr. Bright had a clean-cut answer in one word: "Euthanasia." It sounded like an echo.

One more anecdote in connexion with Mr. Bright. When he died I had already migrated to the other political camp, in the futile belief that Lord Randolph Churchill's Tory Democracy might become a living force for substituting national for party government. Before leaving the *Mail*, knowing Mr. Bright's condition to be precarious, I had written and pigeon-holed a leader for publication if and when required. My

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successor, who was quite within his rights, declined to surrender the MS., and I had to prepare another article, and almost inevitably it was on identical lines. It thus happened that on the day after Mr. Bright's death both evening papers had virtually the same leader with, in many passages, the same forms of expression. Some sharp alterations took place between people who were at cross-purposes as to which of the two journals had contained the article they were discussing.

## CHAPTER X

Republicanism in theory and practice—An escapade with Lord Aylesford—Mr Chamberlain on the remedy for local distress—The G.O.M.—The lost hat—Sir Charles Dilke's hot reception

IN 1874 the Prince and Princess of Wales visited Birmingham in connexion with a great municipal function, Mr. Chamberlain being Mayor at the time. He was then generally credited with republican tendencies, at any rate with believing that theoretically a republic is the best form of government. The fact that he generally wore a bright-red necktie was often referred to as a proof of his political heresy, and many people, who ought to have known better, looked forward to his meeting with their Royal Highnesses as if they expected him to be guilty of boorish behaviour. They nudged each other, looked wise, and said: "Ah, we shall see." If there was one thing more conspicuous about Mr. Chamberlain than another it was that, although he was an advanced Radical, he was, first of all, an English gentleman. He, as Mayor, could not possibly have been guilty of discourtesy to a guest, to say nothing of a royal guest, at the Mayor's table. The quidnuncs, who were agape with expectation of seeing a red flag waved before the eyes of the royal visitors, might have employed their speculation to better



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purpose. Mr. Chamberlain made admirable speeches, both in proposing the Queen and Their Royal Highnesses—speeches of loyalty and good taste—without surrendering the freedom of political opinion which, as he said, is one of the great heritages handed down to us.

The visit was not without an amusing incident. The royal guests drove to Birmingham by road from Packington Hall, and on the outskirts of the town they had to pass a small local police-station. As decorations were the order of the day, the officer-in-charge was not going to be behind his neighbours, so he had fastened right across the building the one word in the dictionary that did not properly fit the occasion. The Prince was consequently much amused when he saw “Welcome” staring at him from a building not accustomed to receive honourable visitors. On reaching Birmingham, the Prince told the joke to Mr. Chamberlain, and they both had a hearty laugh.

Packington Hall is the seat of the Earls of Aylesford. I knew something of the late Earl, and on several occasions spent an hour or two in his company. He had the reputation of being a rather “rapid” gentleman in his mode of life, and it was hardly conducive to an editor’s character for super-sanity to be an associate of his. But he was a jovial, amusing, overgrown boy, irresponsible to the verge of recklessness, and ready at all times for any dare-devil game. As I made

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it my business to know everybody, no false dignity hindered me from mixing with all sorts and conditions of men ; but Lord Aylesford, when in one of his “ sons of Belial ” moods, was very nearly “ the limit.” He certainly tried my tolerance to the utmost when he invited me one day to dine with him in the Market Hall, and in a spirit of adventure I accepted the invitation. The Market Hall is a very large building set out with stalls, one or two of which were then, and perhaps are now, appropriated to the “ cook’s shop ” business of serving cheap hot dinners for market assistants. There was no inner room where the diner could shelter himself from observation. He had to eat at a counter in the sight of every passer-by. This was all very well for the day-labourers in the market, whose plying of the knife and fork attracted no attention, but it was a different thing when my Lord Aylesford and two of his black-coated friends took their places at the counter and proceeded to eat hot beef and vegetables at sevenpence a plate.

It soon got noised abroad that Lord Aylesford was having a cheap dinner, and in a few minutes a staring and grinning and pushing crowd assembled. Nor was it long before the crowd became a mob. I did not feel any too comfortable. Fortunately, I was not recognised ; or, if recognised, I was completely overshadowed by my noble friend, and any nervous dread I may have had of a scene in which the editor of the *Mail* played a conspicuous

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figure was driven away by the comforting reflection that I had secured a good "newsy" paragraph. When we had finished and got up to go, Lord Aylesford had to fight his way through the crowd of admirers who had gathered like bees round a honey-pot to see a real live nobleman feed. As soon as an opportunity offered I slipped away, went out by a different door, and hurried back to the office. There I wrote a quarter-of-a-column story, headed "Moral Courage in the Peerage; The Earl of Aylesford has a Sevenpenny Dinner in the Market Hall." He had a bit of a surprise when a little later he saw the news bills at every street corner with big type announcements of his exploit.

In Mr. Chamberlain's first or second mayoralty there was serious unemployment in Birmingham, and much distress. It became necessary to organise relief measures, and a provisional committee was summoned by the Mayor to consider what was the best plan to adopt. At the first meeting a well-known Edgbastonian, a Mr. E., objected to the suggested raising of subscriptions and distributions of charitable aid on the ground, so familiar to hard natures, that they tend to pauperise the recipients and make them less self-reliant. These remarks were quite at variance with the prevailing sentiment of the meeting, as well as hostile to its purpose. Mr. Chamberlain, nevertheless, condescended to argue the question with Mr. E.

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"How, then, do you propose to deal with the situation?" he asked.

Mr. E. thought that if left alone it would right itself in time.

"In time? Yes, but what about the starving people in the meanwhile?"

Mr. E. considered that if they had not saved money in the good times they ought to be dealt with on "statutory principles."

"Meaning, I suppose, parochial relief? But will not that do the very thing to which you object? Will it not pauperise them?"

Well, if they were unable to maintain an independent status in the community, the only thing was for them to go under.

"Am I to understand, then," asked Mr. Chamberlain, "that instead of helping these people by voluntary contributions you propose to put the cost of supporting some thousands of them on the rates?"

"I don't see that either course is necessary," said Mr. E., "but if it is, I prefer the one that makes people bear the consequences of their own actions, to the one that shields them from those consequences, and encourages them to the same recklessness again."

"That may be a sound economic principle," replied Mr. Chamberlain. "I will not discuss whether it is, or not. We are here to deal with an emergency—a life-and-death emergency. These people must either be fed, or they must starve.

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The workhouses would not hold a tithe of them, even if you attempted to force them in. The ratepayers would rebel at being compelled to bear the huge cost when volunteers are prepared to do so. An organised system of temporary relief on a voluntary basis is the only practical solution, and I do not propose to waste any more time in debating unfeeling theories which, if adopted, would lead to a colossal disaster."

Mr. E.'s further attempt to continue the discussion was put down by the unanimous interruptions of the impatient meeting, and the committee quickly got to business. There were no reporters present, but I was one of those invited to the meeting, and I took a note of the above dialogue, which has never before been printed. It is a good example of Mr. Chamberlain's concise methods and resolute way of dealing with unreasonable opposition.

When Mr. Gladstone, in the days of Liberal unity, visited Birmingham he made two public speeches, one in Bingley Hall and the other in the Town Hall, both of which I heard. These addresses were characterised by a prominent Liberal as "a sonorous flow of qualifying parentheses," and there were undoubtedly many passages that were comparable to those algebraic arrangements of brackets within brackets which distress the souls of youthful mathematicians. There was this difference between the oratory of Bright and Gladstone: in the former, the rhetoric seemed



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to be subordinate to the argument; in the latter, the argument appeared, though it was not really so, to be subordinate to the rhetoric. The very fluency of Gladstone's speech robbed it of that quality of simple force which is more convincing than eloquence. In connexion with this visit I met the G.O.M. privately for the first and only time. It was at one of Mr. Chamberlain's dinner parties, given in his honour and attended by the leading local Liberals. If he was expected to talk he certainly fulfilled the expectation. His conversation differed little from his speech-making. There were the same elaborate and involved sentences, the same parenthetical qualifications, the same beautiful tones and melodious cadences of voice. It follows that there was something of the *ore rotundo* about it. His knowledge of every subject, political, commercial, scientific and religious seemed encyclopædic; but those who chose to challenge his views had to be very nimble, or he was up and away on another scent and there was no stopping him. He was not what one would call a "good listener," and "brilliant flashes of silence" were not his *forte*.

After one of Gladstone's meetings his hat was missing. He had a big head, and the corollary of a big head is a big hat. A hunt was made for it everywhere—on and under the chairs, at the back of the platform, and in every conceivable place where it might by chance have been mislaid.

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No success rewarded the searchers, who included Liberal politicians from all parts of the Midlands, and the Chairman declared—

“ That when nobody twigged it,  
Some rascal or other had popped in and prigged it.”

The venerable statesman could not, of course, be allowed to leave the hall without a hat, and many were proffered to him, but they were all too small. One after another he tried them on, amid much laughter, only to look like a giant surmounted by a coffee-canister. At last a big-headed man from the dispersing audience came forward and modestly offered his head-gear. Then the fault was on the other side: it was far too large even for Mr. Gladstone. The brim dropped to his shoulders and his head was as completely lost to view as if an extinguisher had been put upon him. This variation of the comedy caused more merriment, but it did not solve the difficulty. A happy—or was it a malicious?—thought then occurred to one of the wits of the company. “ Send for Councillor ——,” he said. Councillor —— was a gentleman of great self-importance; everything he said and everything he did testified to the value he put upon himself. Still, no one understood how he could be of assistance. “ Send for Councillor ——, I say,” was repeated in a louder tone. “ Why? What can he do?” was chorussed by all sorts of voices. “ What can

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he do? Why, hasn't he the biggest swelled head in Birmingham?"

Before the laughter had died down, some one produced a coloured silk handkerchief, and twisting it round Mr. Gladstone's head turban-fashion, enabled him to brave the outer air in safety. His own hat was never recovered. Some devotee must have made off with it as a souvenir.

Some time after Sir Charles Dilke had made his speech in Parliament attacking the outlays in connexion with the maintenance of the British monarchy, he visited Birmingham for the purpose of delivering an address in the Town Hall. The loyalists of the town were organised to give him a hot reception, and they chose pepper for their principal weapon. A liberal distribution of this penetrating spice in all parts of the hall brought on an epidemic of sneezing, which, combined with the angry comments of his opponents, prevented the right honourable gentleman from obtaining a hearing. Only the reporters, into whose adjacent ears he shouted, were privileged to catch occasional sentences of what he had to say. In fact, for all practical purposes the meeting was a failure.

I was not present at it, for which I was thankful—not altogether appreciating cayenne pepper in my eyes—but I was one of a few guests invited to meet Sir Charles at supper afterwards. He did not seem at all pleased with Birmingham's reception, and expressed surprise that there should

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be so much aggressive loyalty in what was believed to be a hot-bed of Radicalism. In the course of conversation he showed me a number of abusive, and in some cases threatening, letters he had received in consequence of his House of Commons speech. They were certainly a little on the violent side. "You damn'd low Republican hound," was one of the choice phrases. "It's a pity you are not carted off to the Tower and treated as other traitors have been before you," was another. I had very little sympathy with Sir Charles's extreme views, but I could not quite agree with the correspondent who thought that he ought to have his head chopped off. After all, his chief criticisms had been directed against a lot of useless, if picturesque, survivals, and because a man objects to the payment of a salary to a Grand High Falconer, when falconry is as dead as Queen Anne, it is not to say that he should be straightway hanged, drawn and quartered.

Sir Charles then drifted off to matters literary and theatrical. He told me stories of slashing criticisms upon plays that had never been performed, of books that had been reviewed without having been read, of critics with prejudices, and of authors who wriggled when impaled. "Criticism," he said, meaning literary criticism, "should possess three special qualities : it should be informed, it should be unbiassed, and it should be moderate." As the proprietor of the *Athenæum* he ought to have known something about the

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ethics of criticism. As a politician with a talent for provoking opposition he ought to have known something about its practical application. Later on, he was to learn something about its savage and unrelenting influence in the domain of morals.



## CHAPTER XI

The universal "seconder"—The notorious Aston Riots—Politics and friendship—The Home Rule split—A Masonic experience—"Extremely probable"—Lord Hartington's delicacy.

THE platform at the Town Hall Liberal meetings was generally reserved for the more prominent of the politicians. Most of those who were prominent at the time have long since been forgotten. If they were not "thunderin' eminent for never having been heard of," they have since become "thunderin' eminent" for not being remembered. There was one funny little Black Country representative, a Mr. N——, who had a mania for seconding resolutions. Directly the proposer sat down, this intrusive gentleman, regardless of the programme, and without waiting for the Chairman's call, jumped up, jerked out, "I beg to second that," and then, without another word, dropped back into his chair.

This happened over and over again. It was pointed out to him more than once that seconds had been arranged for; he took no notice, and continued to pop up like a Jack-in-the-box with his everlasting, "I beg to second that." Then it was tried to keep him away by withholding his invitation. That proved equally futile, for he

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turned up just the same without one, and was as alert as ever with his monotonous formal announcement,—as monotonous as the Raven's "Nevermore."

This eccentricity at last became farcical. "I beg to second that" was always received with jeers and a caustic commentary, which broke the continuity of serious interest and upset the equanimity of the proper seconders. The nuisance had to be stopped somehow. After much deliberation, the organisers of a meeting about to be held decided on a course of action which it was left to the proposed Chairman to carry out.

When the night arrived, the little Black Country gentleman was on the platform as usual, and waiting for his accustomed cue. The Chairman, having opened the proceedings with a suitable speech, rose again and unexpectedly called upon Mr. N—— to propose the first resolution. Mr. N—— was taken unawares. At first he sat still, looking rather bewildered, then the Chairman, pointing to him, said: "Come, Mr. N——, the audience is waiting."

Slowly he rose, took in his hand the copy of the resolution that had been passed to him, gazed uneasily around, and then, amid an impressive silence, spoke thus: "Mr. Chairman, I beg to second the resolution."

There was a roar of laughter such as the Town Hall has probably never heard equalled, and it

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was fully five minutes before the business of the meeting could be proceeded with. Meanwhile, Mr. N—— had vanished. He slipped away from the hall and did not return. Nor was he ever seen at any other Liberal meetings. Report said at the time that in revenge for the ridicule to which he had been subjected, he had gone over to the Conservative party. It was hardly likely, for in that part of the country the Conservatives were themselves all seconders and there was no room for another.

Out of the local political feuds arose that discreditable incident which is known to history as the Aston Riots. I am not going to be betrayed into entering into any detailed examination of that affair; partly because there is nothing to be gained by raking over the dead ashes of a bygone quarrel, and partly because I know too much about it. A few words must suffice for an outline of the story. The Conservatives arranged for a big demonstration at the Aston Lower Grounds, and secured the attendance of one of their most prominent leaders of ministerial rank to address the meeting. To get rid of the chance of interruptions, admission was restricted to the holders of tickets. All would, no doubt, have gone well, but for the fact that a large number of forged tickets were printed and distributed to people whose instructions were to kick up a row and prevent the speakers being heard. This nefarious plot was only too successful. The

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intruders obtained admission unchallenged, and in numbers that made their opposition formidable. Vocal disturbance soon developed into physical violence. The platform was stormed, the furniture was smashed, assaults were committed, a great deal of damage was done, and the meeting was broken up and ended in wild confusion. It was a miserable exhibition of organised party malice.

Some days afterwards, Lord Randolph Churchill drew attention to the riot in the House of Commons, made a bitter attack on the local Liberals, and by implication accused Mr. Chamberlain of being indirectly, if not directly, responsible for the disorder. His indictment produced a considerable effect for the day. But Mr. Chamberlain, a day or two later, replied to the attack, and brought forward a great sheaf of affidavits which not only exonerated himself, but completely turned the tables on his opponent. The matter, however, did not end there. There were local inquiries, fierce controversies, and a prosecution of some of the smaller fry. And then the hubbub died out, and if not forgotten, ceased to be a subject of active discussion. But it left a bitter taste behind, and poisoned for a long time the relations of the two parties.

There I will leave it. I could, if it were worth while, throw some light upon the preparation of the plot, and the methods by which the exculpatory affidavits were secured behind the back of

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Mr. Chamberlain. I know who were the prime movers, but some of them are now dead, and cannot answer for themselves. The real story has never been told, and what I know of it never will be. Let the dead past bury its dead.

Before quitting these political reminiscences altogether I should like to refer to two incidents showing the connexion between party differences and personal friendship. Lawson Tait, the eminent surgeon, was a friend of mine for several years preceding the Home Rule split, and I frequently dined at his house. It was there, I may say in passing, that I met Arthur Dacre and his charming wife (Miss Amy Roselle), both of whom died so tragically in Australia. Tait was by way of being an epicure, and some of his feasts were as notable for the novelty as for the variety of the dishes; but his taste in wines was—let us say eccentric. He was in the habit of buying up what wine merchants called “curious lots,” and the adjective was certainly justifiable, for they *were* curious. With the most hospitable disposition in the world he sometimes put his guests through a prandial purgatory by serving them with strange and nameless brands that seemed to mock the artistry of his *ménus*. Once Powell Williams was dining with him, and a Beaune was brought out with much pre-assurance of its historic quality. P. W. did not pretend to be a connoisseur, but he at least knew *vin* from *vin-aigre*; he sniffed, tasted, made a wry face,



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and said, "Tait, I sincerely hope this will not turn out to be a Beaune of contention."

Tait took very badly the defection of his friend Chamberlain from the Ministry, and ultimately from the Gladstonian party. That event was indeed the cause of the sundering of many political friendships. The Liberal party was rent in twain, and we had the rare spectacle of Arthur Chamberlain breathing defiance to Alderman Cook; of Schnadhorst gnashing his teeth over the heresy of the *Daily Post*, and of Lawson Tait deliberately cutting those of his old associates who chose to think differently from himself. This political rupture soon developed into something like social ostracism. From such functions as were controlled by the Chamberlainites the Gladstonians were excluded. Several faces that one had been accustomed to see at Highbury and elsewhere were thenceforward conspicuous by their absence. Tait carried his animosity to the verge of uncouthness, and this is the more remarkable because he was not an Irishman and had not, up to that time, taken a particularly prominent part in local or imperial politics. He was a brilliant surgeon, and commanded big fees; but his manners were anything but sweet when he met or discussed Liberal Unionists.

Now let me give another picture. In 1880, I was initiated into Freemasonry in the Alma Mater Lodge, and two months later became a fully-fledged master-mason. This is the highest

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degree in the craft to which I have ever aspired. I should not refer to my very humble connexion at all but for the fact that it gave me an early opportunity of proving what an excellent solvent of political differences Masonry may be. Colonel Fred Burnaby, a year or two later, was taking a very active part in Birmingham politics. He made some slashing speeches from the Conservative point of view, and was duly abused by the *Post* and the *Mail* for his "truculence," "vulgarity," "ignorance of politics," and so forth. Perhaps the author of the *Ride to Khiva* had asked for a verbal trouncing; but whether he had or not he certainly got it. It was in these circumstances that he was proposed for, and elected to, the Alma Mater Lodge. Remembering that I had criticised his speeches in language not very superior to that of Eatanswill, I felt a little uncomfortable. I also remembered that he had, by way of rejoinder, called our paper the "evening rag." And this sort of thing had gone on for days together, the *Mail* abusing Burnaby and Burnaby abusing the *Mail*, as if they were animated by the most rancorous personal hatred.

Now, any one who knows anything of Freemasonry knows that personal animosities must not exist inside a Lodge. The other brethren of the Alma Mater were therefore not a little curious to see how two such well-advertised political opponents would behave to each other. They did not, of course, expect any breach of the peace,

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which, considering that Colonel Burnaby was over six feet high and one of the strongest men in the British Army, and that I was many inches shorter and by no means of Herculean physique, would have been too ludicrous for realisation, even if Masonic etiquette could have tolerated it. Still, there might perhaps be a glare of cold civility, or a practical ignoring of each other's presence; and the law of brotherhood, while kept in the letter, might be evaded in the spirit. But there was no such happening. No sooner had Colonel Burnaby been made an entered apprentice, and the Lodge had been called from labour to refreshment, than he and I, without a word of apology or introduction or explanation, found ourselves joined in the friendliest intercourse and in the cheerful discussion of subjects as remote from politics as church hymns are from the differential calculus. Not one word about what had passed; not a syllable of formal or even jocular regret for excess of party zeal; nothing but a bright, jolly talk about things in general, punctuated with liftings of our glasses in friendly challenge.

The next day we "returned to our muttuns"—but with a difference. There was no surrender of principle on either side, but the tone of criticism was chastened, our terms of rebuke or contempt were more moderate; our proof-spirit of partisanship was diluted with the water of mutual consideration. No one can say that this was a worthless result of Masonry. It lifted what

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was at best a slang-whanging contest into one that had at least some show of courtesy about it.

One of the numerous Liberal-Unionist dinner-parties to which I was invited was given by Lord Lymington (afterwards Earl of Portsmouth) at his house in Grafton Street, W. The other guests were the Marquis of Hartington, Mr. Chamberlain, Lord James of Hereford, Lord Justice Bowen, Mr. Justice Jeune, Mr. Buckle (then editor of *The Times*) and Mr. Jesse Collings. Lord Justice Bowen told a story of a student who was being examined in mathematics. The paper contained a certain proposition that had to be demonstrated. On being asked afterwards how he had got on with this proposition, whether he had proved it or not, he replied, "Well, I don't know that I exactly proved it, but I made it appear extremely probable."

After dinner there was a big reception, during which I had an intimate chat with the Marquis of Hartington. He had been sounded, he told me, as to whether he would care to visit Birmingham and speak there for the Unionist cause; and he wanted to know what sort of a reception he would be likely to get. I assumed, naturally, that if he went he would go under the auspices of Mr. Chamberlain, and I felt quite justified in saying that he would be heartily welcomed. But from something he afterwards let fall I concluded that the invitation or suggestion came from another quarter, and that Lord Hartington was

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a little troubled as to the construction which might be put on the appearance of independent action. He evidently had no intention of poaching on Mr. Chamberlain's manors, or of doing anything that would detract from Mr. Chamberlain's importance as leader of the Unionist party in Birmingham. Wherever the suggestion originated it was not acted upon. Nor did Lord Hartington visit the town at the request of Mr. Chamberlain. He did not, in fact, visit it at all, and so far as I know he never spoke publicly on any Birmingham platform. This sensitive delicacy, carried to the point of punctiliousness, in his political relations was one of the outstanding characteristics of this straightforward statesman.



## CHAPTER XII

Early contributors of the *Mail*—Mixed theology—The Birmingham Union Fair—Stealing a march on a competitor—Working up an “exclusive”—The quiet drunkards—Fussy social reformers.

SOMEWHAT early in the career of the *Mail* we were fortunate in getting the services of two outside contributors of unusually good quality. One was R. L. Thompson, a cashier in Lloyd's Bank, who wrote a weekly article on sporting and kindred subjects, in a light, amusing style that was looked forward to and enjoyed by a very large number of readers. The *nom de plume* of his own selection was “The Odd Man Out,” and I have no doubt that he was the “first and onlie begetter” of that happily conceived name. The other was Eliezer Edwards, whose “Personal Recollections” of prominent Birmingham men were interesting and well written. Much of the growing popularity of the paper was due to the articles of these two gentlemen. We were no longer mere sensation-mongers depending upon casual street sales: we were educating ourselves up to a respectable family standard, which meant many thousands of regular subscribers. I, also, wrote a series of weekly sketches, under the heading of “Pulpit Photographs,” describing

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visits to the principal churches and chapels of the town. I cannot boast that I possessed the right qualifications for the work, and my sympathies were not quickened by this hebdomadal martyrdom on my only day of "rest." By keeping mainly to description I avoided the pitfalls of controversy that might otherwise have swallowed me up. It is difficult to imagine a more ingenious form of mental torture than that of compelling the victim to listen to sectarian views of a different kind every week. It is like tasting a lot of different liquors : the flavours become mixed and indistinguishable, and a headache is the result. One week I listened to an evangelical Nonconformist divine and the next to a Ritualistic parson ; on a third to a Christadelphian, on a fourth to a Roman Catholic father, and thereafter to a Swedenborgian, a Unitarian, a Wesleyan Methodist, a Primitive Methodist, a New Connexion Methodist, a Catholic Apostolic "angel," a Low Churchman, a Plymouth Brother, and so on until I must have run through the whole gamut of Christian theology. I ought to have emerged from this discipline with some sort of crystallised faith ; but the actual result was the same as in Omar Kháyyám's case—

" I heard great argument  
About it and about : but evermore  
Came out by the same door as in I went."

One of the institutions of Birmingham when I went there first was the Onion Fair, but it only

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lasted a few years, being cut off in all its rude and healthy vigour by a municipal decree of banishment beyond the town's boundaries. And mine was one of the hands that helped to drive it forth ! I, who loved these ancient and picturesque survivals, and often spent a whole evening in going from one show to another, became traitor to my natural feelings in the interests of civic order. For one could not hide from one's self that to give up the very centre of a big town for the best part of a week to a saturnalia of drunken revelry was injurious to trade, an interference with traffic, and in every way a public nuisance. So although I delighted in the theatrical booth with its tragedy and pantomime in twenty minutes, and enjoyed the sparring contests of unscientific yokels, and patronised the circus time after time to see a young damsel of about forty-five jump through paper balloons, and even stood in wondering admiration before the Fat Woman with a wrist as thick as a man's thigh, I was moved by a sense of duty to denounce it all as an anachronism better suited to some town of the Middle Ages than to one whose motto is "Forward."

It was a great fair while it lasted, and the ancient Bull-ring was wholly given up to its boisterous joys. The keepers of the beerhouses were happy, for somehow a fair is always associated with ale more or less nut-brown, and with drunken disputes and occasional scenes of violence.

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I have seen the Living Skeleton tremble at a quarrel between the money-taker and a man who wanted his twopence back because no bones were actually protruding. I have seen the Merman whisk off his artificial tail at the sound of a row outside, and seek comfort in a bottle of something that was not taken from the briny deep. It was well that this riot of misrule should find some other resting-place. No one could contend that the sale of onions required such surroundings, or that it was necessary to prop up the commercial interests of that pungent vegetable with roundabouts and cocoanut shies. So the decree went forth, and the fair was banished to some waste ground at Aston, where in exile and stripped of its splendours it tried to keep up a sort of feeble jollity, without a single stall of onions to stimulate a sympathetic tear.

The *Mail* had several evening rivals at one time or other, and when there was a rival in the field we had to be exceptionally on the alert in getting first results of interesting events. Football matches and criminal verdicts evoked our most audacious energies, for to be "out first" made a difference sometimes of several thousands in the circulation for the day. At that time, prisoners committed to the Assizes were tried at Warwick, and in every case of great interest the verdict was anxiously looked for. We relied then upon the telegraph, and it was almost entirely a question of getting first to the telegraph office with

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the news. By the time the first-comer had got his message through it was all over with the prospect of his less fleet-footed competitors. Now, our reporters, however excellent in other respects, were not all sprinters, and this was a disadvantage that had to be overcome. On one occasion—I think, but cannot be sure, that it was the trial for murder of a youthful hooligan named Corkery for stabbing a policeman with a pocket-knife—we were desperately anxious to be out first with the verdict, and to be out first it was imperative that we should be first to get the verdict through. I went over to Warwick myself, and when the judge was evidently getting to the end of his summing-up I slipped out of Court, hurried to the telegraph office, and began to wire an extract from a book in my pocket (I believe it was Macaulay's *Essays*). I had left directions with the reporters what to do, and immediately the jury had given their verdict of "Guilty" a message to that effect was rushed along to me, and right in the middle of a sentence of a purely literary character came the incongruous, and to anybody but a sub-editor, unintelligible words, "Guilty, sentenced to death." Result: we were out in the streets and selling by the thousand a full three-quarters of an hour before our rival put in a crestfallen and superfluous appearance.

Since writing the above paragraph I came across a similar story in Ford Madox Hueffer's delightful volume of recollections called *Ancient*



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*Lights.* A musical critic at one of the Worcester festivals got so mellow after dinner that he neglected, or was unable, to write his notice, and Hueffer's father volunteered to help him out of his difficulty. But let Hueffer tell the story in his own inimitable way: "We rushed off at once to the telegraph office and did what we could to induce the officials to keep the wires open whilst the notice was being written. But all inducements failed. My father hit upon a stratagem at the last moment. At that date it was a rule of the Post Office that if the beginning of a long message were handed in before eight o'clock, the office must be kept open until its conclusion, as long as there was no break in the handing in of the slips. My father, therefore, commanded me to telegraph anything I liked to the newspaper office as long as I kept it up whilst he was writing the notice of 'The Messiah,' and the only thing that came into my head at the moment was the Church Service. The newspaper was therefore astonished to receive a long telegram beginning: '*When the wicked man turneth away from the sin that he has committed*' and continuing through the *Te Deum* and the *Nunc Dimittis*, till suddenly it arrived at 'The Three Choirs Festival, Worcester, Wednesday, July 27, 1887.'"

As my Warwick incident took place seven or eight years before 1887, if there was any plagiarism in the idea it was not mine.

Then, the craving for "scoops," that is, exclu-

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sive news, kept us always on the *qui vive*. Many illustrations besides the above could be given to show what artful devices were often necessary to be first with a good thing, or to keep the good thing to ourselves. I will mention only one. There was a prominent Town Councillor and local politician—I will not give his name—who had committed an indiscretion in connexion with the purchase of land required for municipal purposes, and it was common knowledge that a committee of his colleagues were investigating the subject. Their report was eagerly awaited, but the Press were informed that in no circumstances whatever would anything be allowed to leak out before it had been presented to the Council. The editors of the morning papers, one of them of great influence, tried hard, but could not get anything, and it seemed hopeless for any one else to give further thought to the unattainable. Yet a day or two before the Council met to receive the report, an elaborate abstract of it, giving the whole story of the transaction, and the pith of the evidence, appeared in the *Mail*. The members of the Committee were furious, the Town Council was indignant. How did the information get to the *Mail*? Who had broken faith? Every possible informant was questioned, without any solution being forthcoming. I believe the principal men in the Council were for applying the “boot” and the thumbscrew to the defiant editor to compel him to disclose the name of the (assumed) traitorous

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committee-man. Yet it was all a very simple matter. No spells or incantations had been used. No committee-man had been hypnotised or drugged, or compelled, with a pistol at his head, to "stand and deliver" the secrets of the committee-room. The article was based upon separate hints obtained from eight or ten different sources, one bit of information being used as a bait to entice others, and then all were woven into a consecutive story and strengthened by certain fairly obvious deductions.

During several years the Chief of Police in Birmingham was an ex-military man, Major Bond. He incurred a good deal of unpopularity and the severe strictures of the local Press on account of an instruction to the members of the Force to arrest quiet drunkards. Whether this brilliant idea originated with himself, or with some of the teetotallers on the Watch Committee, is not material; in any case, he was the administrative instrument for carrying out the policy. Under this regulation it was no longer necessary for a toper to be either incapable or disorderly before he could be taken into custody; he was liable to that indignity if he were quietly zig-zagging home without annoying any one, and apologising to the lamp-posts when he bumped against them. He was the lawful prey of a constable if he so much as punctuated his outdoor conversation with hiccoughs, or failed after many attempts to find eventually the keyhole of his own front

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door. It was a bad time for those who got drunk in their legs, or who found a difficulty in pronouncing "truly rural."

A man who, though full of liquor, could manage to walk an imaginary straight line, and had the discretion to remember that silence is golden, was not interfered with; but to stumble or lurch or stutter or burst into convivial song, was to invite the sinister gleam of a bull's-eye and the application of such insobriety tests as its possessor might think fit to employ. This was an unnecessary interference with the liberty of the subject, and Major Bond came in for a good deal of merited lampooning. The Q.D.'s were elevated into martyrs in the sacred cause of British freedom, with the natural consequence that the administration of the law fell into contempt. In the end, public opinion was too strong for the innovation; the mischievous edict was either revoked or left unenforced; and the police were expected, when they saw a disciple of Bacchus reeling home, to gaze steadfastly in another direction. Nothing short of going to sleep in the gutter was considered enough to qualify the offender for being run in.

There was a great deal of what, without disrespect, I may call "petticoat influence" in Birmingham, exercised in an honest, well-meaning spirit of social reform, but sometimes rather narrow in its proposed methods. Wives of Non-conformist ministers and town councillors were specially active in moral propaganda work, and



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I had to receive a good many deputations of them urging me to support views which, on the whole, I was much more inclined to oppose. I bore with these afflictions in a spirit of forced resignation, listened to their speeches with patience, and occasionally ventured on an edgeways comment, but always reserved the right to "consider the matter," which ultimately meant taking my own course. Once, however, I actually had the effrontery to dispute with one of the most prominent women in the town, a great teetotaller, a Blue Ribbonite, an advocate of local option, and of all sorts of restrictions on personal liberty in the interests of sobriety and morality. This lady, accompanied by a battalion of satellites, overwhelmed me in my office one day. "We have come, Mr. Editor, to ask you to help us in our great work of temperance. We propose to form a league of well-known people who will pledge themselves not to take any intoxicating drink, or enter any licensed house, for a period of one month. It will be a great example, and we want not only your editorial influence, but also your name as a member of the League."

"Mrs. ——," I replied, "I am not a teetotaller, and I never mean to be. I enjoy my beer or wine, and I mean to stick to it. As for not going into public-houses for a month, I consider them to be valuable public institutions; in fact, I have spent some of the happiest hours of my life in 'pubs,' and I hope to spend a good many more."



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Perhaps, as I am very busy just now, you will allow me to say good morning? ”

The lady gave me a horrified, disdainful look, gathered up her skirts, shook them, and sailed out of the room, followed by her troop of sympathisers, each one of whom looked at me as if I had been a leper. I was a *persona ingrata* with the Puritan matrons for a long time after.

## CHAPTER XIII

Funeral reform—The Rational Sunday—Newspaper errata—  
Cockfighting and cricket—The editor publicly prayed for.

BUT the “we” of the *Mail*, although intolerant of fads and faddists, was always in the run of social reform so long as it was consistent with the true spirit of Liberalism, and one of the movements in which we took a leading part was that for simple and economical funerals. Before that movement a working-man’s widow often incurred a debt of £20 or £30 to bury her man. The tyrant Custom decreed that there must be what Mr. Mould called “long-tailed blacks,” with nodding plumes, and a hearse embossed with a florid, but inartistic design, and a retinue of hired mutes with crêpe hat-bands reaching nearly to the ground. It was a woeful waste of money, and many a family was crippled by it for months. So the *Mail* went for it, angering the undertakers and invoking threats of vengeance. I had a friend who kept a big mourning house. He sold thousands of yards of black silk in a year. When we began to urge the better-off classes to set an example in funeral economy, he was my friend no longer. He had a vested interest in pompous display and useless mortuary fripperies, and he thought that I was dealing him personally a treacherous blow. The

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paper, nevertheless, persisted in its crusade, and in the course of time saw a great change for the better. Much of the garish ornament of the "trappings and the suits of woe" disappeared, and a sober and decent fashion was generally approved in its stead.

Another important question that I took up was that of the Rational Sunday. At that time, the gloom of the Puritan tradition hung over the provincial Sunday. There were no Sunday excursions, no outdoor games, no high-class concerts, no entertaining lectures, no picture-galleries and museums to beguile the tedium of its idleness. Those who liked could go to church, or read sermons, or act as their pious promptings directed; but those who held more worldly views, and who resented the dictation of the Evangelical conscience, had nothing provided for them but the public-house. I took up this question with conviction, and I hammered at it with zeal. I believe the *Mail* was the first paper to advocate Sunday cricket matches. It tried its best to get rid of the old narrow domination that regulated Sunday observance. It pleaded for a day of relaxation, of innocent recreation, of becoming mirth, in lieu of the cheerless customs of a sombre religionism.

This campaign was a little too much for the Nonconformists and the Low Churchmen. Mr. R. W. Dale, the minister of Carr's Lane Chapel, thought it worth his while to preach a sermon on the duty of "keeping holy the Sabbath day" and

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on the dangerous teaching of the *Daily Mail*, and parts of his sermon were reported. I had to reply, and I appealed to Mr. Dale's professed liberalism in its broad sense against his own Sabbatarian arguments. I asked for freedom of opinion so long as no one was injured by its translation into action. By this time, however, the proprietors of the *Mail* were getting fidgety, and they thought it would be better if I dropped the subject for a while. I had certainly brought a hornets' nest about my ears, for goody-goody folk can be very uncharitable towards those from whom they differ. But I was not the man to "climb down." Without forcing the matter, I returned to it at frequent intervals, and kept on advocating Sunday concerts, and Sunday exhibitions, and Sunday excursions to interesting places—in other words, a Sunday that should be a restorative both physically and mentally.

And the seed bore fruit : we have all these things now. Birmingham has them and is proud of them. They have done no harm, but a lot of good, to the community. The working man, after his weekly outing, is a better citizen ; his children, after a literary and scientific lecture, or a visit to an art gallery, are started on the road to a more refined conception of life. I see my friends playing Sunday tennis in their gardens, and Sunday boating parties on the upper reaches of the Thames, and I feel proud to know that I put one humble brick in the edifice of a Rational

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Sunday that has grown up in the last forty years.

The reference to the police in the previous chapter reminds me of a comical misprint in the *Mail*. One afternoon particulars were brought to the office concerning what had just missed being a serious carriage accident. A pair of horses harnessed to an open landau had bolted in the Hagley Road, the coachman had jumped off in a fright, and the two lady passengers were screaming and gesticulating for help. A disastrous collision with something or other seemed inevitable, when a policeman dashed into the road, made a snatch at the reins, just succeeded in catching hold of them, and, hanging on in spite of the jerks and buffets of the frightened horses, was able to bring them to a stop. It was a courageous deed, and the sub-editor promptly decided to give prominence to the story for the main edition, heading it—

“RUNAWAY HORSES STOPPED. A  
POLICEMAN’S GREAT FEAT.”

The paper was printed and all over the town before it was discovered that a clumsy or malicious compositor had turned “feat” into “feet.” What that blunder meant can be readily imagined by every one who recalls the part played by mothers-in-law and policemen’s big feet in the humours of the music-halls. The paragraph that was intended to be complimentary was turned into something like a sneer, and it was only by



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starting a subscription for the policeman that the *Mail* succeeded in smoothing his ruffled feelings—or, to be more accurate, his outraged “understanding.”

Every newspaper contains some misprints, though few of them are as ludicrous as that given above. Perhaps this may be regarded as one of the few. A leading citizen died suddenly. He was known when alive to be a straightforward man, whose word could always be taken. He was also known as a big eater, though this characteristic was only referred to jokingly among his friends, for, after all, appetite is a matter of degree, and no man is inclined to measure his own corn by another man's bushel. Conceive of the consternation that was caused when the *Mail's* obituary stated that “in every relation of life the late Mr. . . . . was distinguished for his voracity!” It was almost as bad when a well-known country squire of Warwickshire was said to have “been out shooting peasants most of the day.” But worse still was the mistake that said of a High Church parson that he “was the tainted son of a sainted mother.” Only two more examples. Of a great hostess we said that “her ladyship deceived her guests at the top of the grand staircase”; and an eminent statesman was made to say: “On these allegations about rotten ships, I must confess that I also am very septical.” Oh, the sad, mad waggery of the compositor's “case”!

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Birmingham was always a sporting town, fond of racing, football and cricket, but its sporting tastes were occasionally shown in the patronage of an amusement forbidden by law. At one time in the 'seventies, there was a good deal of surreptitious cock-fighting going on in the suburbs. I had a friend, a well-to-do manufacturer with quasi-literary tastes, who frequently had a select little Sunday morning party at his house to see what there was to be seen. The carpet was taken up in his dining-room, the floor was laid with freshly-cut turves, and at the appointed time a couple of bellicose young cocks, silver-spurred for the fray, were let go at each other. I confess that I went to one or two of these entertainments, but with fear and trembling, for if the police had got wind of the affair and the company had been run in, I should have cut a pretty figure as editor of a paper assisting at a deliberate breach of the law. I could hardly have pleaded that I was there in the interests of humanity, or even as a mere recorder of events, and a conviction would have been distinctly unpleasant. The mental anxiety caused by the suspense, coupled with a feeling of disgust with the spectacle provided, led me to drop my sporting friend and spend my Sunday mornings in a more lawful, if not in a more edifying, way.

When the Warwickshire Cricket Club was formed I was one of the earliest of the "looking

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on " members. In one of the matches got up to create interest in the Club, and played at its new ground, "W. G." was captain of one of the teams, and a big crowd assembled to see the hero of so many "centuries." Among the spectators was the Mayor of Birmingham (not yet a city), and during the luncheon interval he asked me to introduce him to Dr. Grace. I performed the duty, but not with every one's approval, for in making the introduction I said: "Doctor, allow me to present the Mayor of Birmingham," whereas, according to the quidnuncs, I ought to have said: "Mr. Mayor, allow me to present Dr. Grace." But I refused to admit that I had made a *faux pas*, and told my critics to go to Halifax. "Grace," I said, "is known all over the world, and the Mayor is not known outside Birmingham, and it would be a topsy-turvy sort of arrangement to try and make the greater planet revolve round the less." "W. G." himself did not understand these distinctions. He was not the man to feel overwhelmed by the handshake of a provincial mayor, however estimable. He exchanged a few polite remarks with his Worship, who knew nothing about cricket, and then turned away to give W. W. Read a resounding slap on the back and a boisterously hearty greeting.

It is presumably a distinction—at any rate, it is a rare occurrence—for an editor to be publicly prayed for. Editors have been preached about, denounced from the pulpit, even anathematised

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with bell, book and candle, but it would seem that as a general rule they have been considered past praying for. I am not aware of any latent possibilities beyond the ordinary in my own case, that could have justified so exceptional a course as a public intercession, and so exceptional an interceder as an American revivalist. It says a great deal for the spirit of international brotherhood when you have the ministers of the New World praying for the regeneration of the sinners of the Old. Mr. Moody was the man to whom I was indebted for this spiritual anxiety on my behalf. Moody and Sankey were visiting Birmingham in the course of their emotional itinerary, and having no tent to pitch, they hired the Town Hall for a series of services. There, twice a day, they urged the unregenerate to flee from the wrath to come, and it was for criticising the opening performance that I came under their grieved notice. They did not like it. They were unaccustomed to a tone of amused contempt, and apprehensive of its effect upon the supply of penitents. Mr. Moody showed a forbearing disposition by only praying for the scoffing editor, instead of forthwith consigning him to the torments to which he (Mr. Moody) seemed to possess the right of nomination. I should have better enjoyed the compliment if he had given me notice of his intention, so that I could have been present in the Town Hall and have listened to the chorus of "Amens" that, as I was told, went up when he

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petitioned that the *Mail* might be brought to see the error of its ways and to devote its powers and advantages to the evangelical cause. It was excellent *réclame*, and that is all that need be said about it.



## CHAPTER XIV

Sir M. Costa's misadventure—Joseph Maas—His premature death—The Bingley Hall cattle show—A great disaster—Grim prophecies fulfilled—A spiritualist exposure.

BIRMINGHAM enjoys a world-wide celebrity for its Triennial Musical Festivals. In the early 'seventies Sir Michael Costa was the conductor, and he had the not very enviable character of being a severe martinet with his instrumentalists. Some of the stories told of his excessive discipline were probably exaggerated, but I have myself heard him at a rehearsal wither up with reproaches a poor devil of a fiddler who happened to be a few minutes late. Although I never, from first to last, attended one of the public performances, I did occasionally avail myself of a rehearsal ticket, and it was on one of those occasions that I witnessed a contretemps which might have had more serious results. Sir Michael was taking one of the principal lady vocalists—an artist of great distinction—through an important aria, and at the same time keeping his eye on the score. When the lady had finished he held out with one hand a chair for her to sit down, while in the other he carried his ivory baton. Whether through trying to do two things at once, or from some other cause, he slipped, and in trying to save

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himself pulled away the chair just at the very moment when the lady was in the act of seating herself. In the absence of the chair she arrived on the floor with a great bump, and as she was a particularly massive person, the hall seemed to vibrate with the concussion. Sir Michael was in fearful distress. He helped the lady to her feet and bombarded her with apologies, which she took none too gracefully. There was no love lost between the two before this incident, and there was no continuation of the rehearsal after it.

When Costa died there was a strong wish all through the country that an English conductor should be appointed to succeed him, and the claims of Sir Arthur Sullivan were favourably canvassed. But the Committee decided otherwise, and Richter was appointed to the position. It was all pro-Germanism in music for many years before the War.

The Festival recalls memories of poor Joe Maas, after the decline of Sims Reeves and Edward Lloyd, our leading English tenor. I often met him and his charming wife at the house of a mutual friend, listened to his stories of travel and the stage, and have even seen him unbend so far as to sing a comic song. On the Christmas Day before his death we were members of a merry party at his host's house, and Christmas was kept up with seasonable feasting and junketing. When the crackers were snapped, and the paper caps and bonnets were unfolded, he

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donned his gaudy headgear with the rest, and made the children laugh with quaint antics and harmless fooling. Not very many days had passed of the New Year when the intelligence was brought to me that he was dead. I had not even heard that he was ill, and the news was a painful shock. It was thus that all our New Year wishes for health and happiness were mocked by the irony of a relentless fate.

He was the first of that Christmas party to make the inevitable journey, and, in the years that have followed, the host and hostess of the occasion and several others have travelled the same road. But I often call up a picture of that happy gathering, and hear again the spluttering of the Yule log, the noise of the crackers, the shouts of excited young people, and the heartfelt good wishes with which, in the bright, frosty midnight air, we shook hands all round and said "A Happy New Year."

Birmingham was, and is, famous for other things besides its Musical Festival, especially for its great annual Cattle Show, which is equal in importance to that of Islington. Strange though it may appear, I then took a great interest in cattle. In my boyhood I had spent a good deal of time on a farm belonging to a relative who was a grazier on a fairly big scale. There I learned something about breeds and "points." I have killed and skinned sheep, and pole-axed oxen, though I cannot say that I much relished the latter operation, particularly if those holding

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the rope that kept the animal's head in the necessary position happened to be physically unequal to the strain.

This was a kind of half training that qualified me to pose as an amateur judge of a fine beast. I was always at Bingley Hall Cattle Shows on the opening days, prodding the exhibits, pinching their rumps, and discussing their merit with the rosy-cheeked visitors from the shires. At the luncheon—of course, there was a luncheon for the judges, officials and the Press—I waxed eloquent (one always “waxes” eloquent on such occasions) on the respective qualities of Devons and Herefords, all of which was reproduced later in the day in the *Mail*. But what gave the shows an unusual interest to the newspapers was the appearance in their pages of “block” advertisements of giant turnips and mangold wurzels, the seed of which must have come from Brobdingnag. It was the only time in the year when “blocks” were admitted, for the Pictorial Age of the daily Press had not yet arrived. It is perhaps needless to say that they were not admitted in Cattle Show week strictly in the interests of agriculture. The rates were raised for so special a concession. Newspaper proprietors could not be expected to disfigure their sheets without being compensated.

Cattle shows are now a thing of the past for me: I do not refer only to the scarcity of fat stock, but also and principally to the fact that

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other interests have superseded that one. Although I have lived in London for many years, I have never once revived those Midland associations by a visit to the Islington Show. Prize cattle are "off." Shorthorns have lost their appeal. But if, by any chance, I should ever receive an invitation to the Press view of a future Birmingham show, I really think I should have to accept it for the sake of "Auld Lang Syne."

May I add here a word about my farmer relative? He has been dead many years, and if I had had to write his epitaph I should have summed up his virtues in this sentence: "He made the best cider I ever tasted." If a cup of that cider with a dash of old plum wine in it was not the genuine ambrosial nectar of the gods, all I can say is that the gods must have been in the habit of drinking extraordinarily good tippie. Let it rest at that. Alas, I don't drink cider now, and if my good friend were to send me, through any spiritual agency, the recipe for his divine brew, I should have no personal use for it.

And now from personal matters to a bit of local history. In January 1879 a great calamity befell Birmingham. It was a cold wintry Saturday afternoon, when the rumour ran round that the Free Reference Library was on fire. The full meaning of this was only appreciated by the bibliophiles who knew what priceless literary treasures the Library contained. Pre-eminent among these was the Shakespeare Memorial



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Library, with its two thousand volumes of works relating to the national bard, including several of the folios and quartos and other rarities. There were also the valuable and unique Cervantes collection, and the irreplaceable Staunton collection of books and pamphlets relating to Warwickshire, besides many miscellaneous items of which there were no other copies in existence. Consternation was the prevailing mood of the crowd that flocked to the scene in the very centre of the town, although there was not much external evidence, beyond clouds of smoke, of the destruction that was being wrought within. Sam Timmins, one of the originators of the Shakespeare Library, looked a broken man, and his sturdy frame shook with emotion. "At one fell swoop," I heard him mutter, after naming some of the choicest of the lost treasures. Very little was saved; the labours of many a lifetime were scattered in ashes through a workman's carelessness. The next morning, wherever the hose had played, long icicles hung to the charred remains of woodwork and masonry. Before the ruins had become cold a movement was started, with Mr. Chamberlain at its head, to make good, as far as it could be made good, this far more than local loss.

I have mentioned this occurrence, not because of its general interest, which, at this remote date, can be but small, but on account of a remarkable series of predictions of which it was the climax. To frame the narrative in its proper order it is

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necessary to go back to the early days of the *Mall*. I was sitting in my office one morning when a message was delivered that a gentleman wanted to see me on urgent business. When he was shown in I was confronted by an elderly man of quiet manner and refined appearance, who, after apologising for his intrusion, said he had a very important communication to make. This information, I gathered, had been given to him in a sort of revelation; nothing spiritualistic, but direct and in the nature of an inspired vision. It was to the effect that a great calamity would happen the next day to Birmingham, involving a terrible loss of life. Ninety-nine editors out of a hundred would have formed the same opinion as I did, namely, that my visitor was a harmless lunatic. I humoured him—told him I was much obliged and wished him “Good-morning,” and then dismissed the matter from my mind.

Now, the remarkable thing is, that on the following day there occurred a great explosion at Kynoch’s ammunition works at Aston, in which many lives were lost, the whole district being thrown into mourning. Still, I put no other construction upon this prediction than that it was one more example of the curiosities of coincidence, and the subject was soon forgotten. Some considerable time after this, my visitor came again, this time with the announcement that one of Birmingham’s most famous men would die suddenly within a day or two. I was

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a little more deferential than on the former occasion, but in vain tried to get a more definite statement. Was it a politician, a man of letters, or a great manufacturer? No information. I had to be content with the very vague announcement, the possible verification of which had in its favour that a man of greater or lesser local importance died nearly every week. Now came another startling coincidence. Two days later the famous preacher and publicist, George Dawson, died suddenly. And once again this prophet of evil came with ill-tidings and foretold a disastrous fire and destruction of valuable property. That was on the day before the burning of the Free Library, and I then began to think that these strange fulfilments of prophecy would have to be accounted for on some other hypothesis than that of coincidence. We have all read of curious cases of second sight : is it within the bounds of possibility that my mysterious visitor possessed that supernormal gift? Be the explanation what it may, that was his last appearance in the *Mall* offices. He came no more with communications or forebodings. Whether he died, or was discouraged because I had taken no public notice of him, I cannot tell. I really believe that if he had come once more and told me what was going to win the "Derby," I should have plunged on his "tip."

As for Spiritualism, that disease from which even the strongest minds are not exempt, I have

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always been, and shall always remain, a scoffer. Not from prejudice, but from the impossibility of getting the tiniest bit of evidence to support it. I have been to *séances*, I have been experimented upon by mediums, but nothing has happened that any ordinary conjuror could not have brought about. When "Dr." Slade came to Birmingham with his slate trick, he had the hardihood to begin by trying to hoodwink the Press, and gave a "private view" to some of its principal members and contributors, including Mr. Sam Timmins and myself. Most of what *he* did after months, if not years, of practice, one of the party was able to do in front of him with no practice at all. It was simply a bit of legerdemain with a pencil and a piece of paper under a table, and the experiment proved that spirits were quite unnecessary for this very ignoble task. In consequence of the Press notices Slade's visit was not an unqualified success, and the support of the few Abdiels, "faithful only among the unfaithful found," could hardly have paid his hotel bill. His subsequent career and conviction in London as "a rogue and vagabond" (a conviction that was afterwards quashed at the Middlesex Sessions) more than justified the sceptical reception he had from my confrères and myself.

## CHAPTER XV

Another prophet of evil tidings—A “lady” swindler—Electric sugar—Sala’s wine criticism—The “Great Cryptogram”—Bret Harte—An experiment in vegetarianism.

HARKING back to my minor prophet, I am reminded that he was not the only visitor who essayed the rôle of soothsayer. There was an old gentleman, always nattily dressed and of spick-and-span appearance, who turned up regularly about once in three months to assure us that the world was coming to an end in, I think, June 1885. He was no fanatic of the Solomon Eagles type. He did not roll the day of doom for sinners like a sweet morsel over his tongue, nor, like Dr. Cumming, profess to discover meanings in the cryptic language of the Book of Revelations. He looked at the subject purely from “a scientific point of view.” He was an amateur astronomer, and had calculated that in or about the month named a great comet would collide with the earth, and shrivel it all up in a few seconds. He brought us sheets of figures to elucidate his theory, but nobody examined them or could have understood them if he had. But our visitor stuck to his guns. Nothing could shake his cheerful faith in his own coming annihilation. He felt hurt if you told



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him you would stand him a dinner directly the fatal month was out; it was impugning his scientific accuracy. The years came and went, and with them 1885, but there was no catastrophe. All the elaborate reckonings and confident foretellings went for naught. When I saw him in August or September he was a downcast and dejected being. Nature had cheated him, and her perfidy had broken his heart. Life had no more allure for him; hope beckoned him in vain; the world had not been destroyed, and he was a miserable and disappointed man.

Another peculiar visitor was a lady, and a very fine lady, too; good-looking, well-dressed, soft and plausible of speech, she at once made an impression. The editor unbent. He consented to listen to her woes. She had been badly treated. The Government owed her money and she could not get it. Would he take up her case? He naturally said that he must have proofs, which sceptical frame of mind caused a moisture in her soft and tender eyes. As he continued deaf to her entreaties, the moisture in the eyes became a trickle on the cheeks. She wept—in the editor's room. A pretty woman crying and a susceptible editor—what a tableau! At last I got rid of her with some evasive half-promise, but she came again and again, always with a tale of her wrongs, and a strewing about of aristocratic names. She might have been connected with half the peerage according to her own account. And she was so

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gentle in her suffering—so sweetly gracious in her appeal for help. Of what, exactly, she wanted I was never sure. I don't think she knew herself, beyond the fact that she was playing a game and her newspaper visits were a part of it.

She went by the name of Mrs. C——. One day I had a telephone message from the Central Police Station saying that Mrs. C—— would be glad to communicate with me. They told me she was under arrest for obtaining money and goods by fraud. It was a thunderclap. That ill-used, delicate, but delightful woman a cheat? Impossible! Nevertheless, just because it was impossible it was true. Not only a cheat, but a notorious cheat. Her exploits had made a noise in a dozen counties. She had obtained thousands of pounds' worth of goods on the strength of a lady-like appearance and a lying tongue. All the time she had been pitching the tale to me of her poverty and bad luck, and of the cold cruelty of the world, she had been running up bills by means of false pretences. There was something like £100 owing at her hotel, a local jeweller had trusted her with a couple of very expensive rings, and so on. Then, to put the finishing touch to the disclosures, it came out that she had already been in prison three or four times, that she was, in fact, an old gaol-bird and the upstart daughter of a Sheffield publican.

What she wanted to see me for, I never ascertained, for I fought shy of the lady in her

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subsequent movements. Bail was out of the question, and the previous convictions precluded any idea of leniency. She was committed for trial, and in due course disappeared once more from the public gaze. I saw her name a few years after in a report of a remarkable series of frauds in Australia. There were no geographical limitations to a talent such as hers.

One swindle recalls another. A few years later whispers went round the town—it was either a city or just about to become a city then—that an inventor in America had found out a wonderful way of refining sugar by electricity. The raw sugar was put into a vessel, a current was turned on, and the next morning beautiful white crystals were found where the raw sugar had been. It was so simple and so cheap, and fortunes were to be made by the lucky ones who invested in it. No one, however, was asked to invest. There were no prospectuses, no advertisements, no public mention beyond a mysterious paragraph now and again. But a demand was nevertheless created by means of Rumour's busy, irresponsible tongue. "B" heard about it from "A," and confided it as a precious secret to "C," who whispered it to "D," who imparted it as a valuable gift to "E," and so on until it had gone right through the alphabet. There was no share-peddling in the usual sense of the term, but there was a certain man in Birmingham, calling himself a merchant, from whom shares or fractions of shares could, as

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a great favour, be obtained in return for solid cash. For these were no common £1 shares, or even the more lordly £5 shares; they, or the letters of assignment, were of the nominal value of £100, but if £100 was too much you could buy the right to half or even a quarter of a share.

And there was money in it. Oh yes, there was money in it. The investors would be rich beyond the dreams of avarice. People saw fortunes waiting to be picked up for a song. Credulity did the rest. Some thousands of pounds were transmitted to America by the good folks of the astute town of Birmingham.

A year or two afterwards the crash came. The "inventor's" wonderful process was closely investigated by suspicious authorities, and it was discovered that the already refined crystals were taken secretly into the building and substituted for the raw sugar. It was nothing, after all, but a brazen dodge—an impudent variant of ringing the changes. I believe the ingenious originator of the scheme was prosecuted; anyhow the "fortunes" of his victims melted like snow in a sudden thaw, or like the dissolving view of an Eastern mirage. Those who had lost their money wisely held their tongues about it and assumed an air of nonchalant superiority, and professed a fictitious sympathy with the sufferers by the fraud. I had left Birmingham when the exposure took place, and I had the pleasurable duty of writing an article in a

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London paper on the text of the threadbare Carlylean dictum, "mostly fools."

I will confess now that I was one of the fools myself, and £50 and I had parted company for ever.

Some years after this, another "scientific inventor" obtained considerable sums of money from a Park Lane gold magnate on the pretence that he had discovered the Philosopher's Stone and could make gold in any quantity at a small cost. He went to prison, but I almost think he ought to have been let off for his amazing cleverness in deceiving one of the shrewdest men of the shrewdest race under the sun.

I must say another word or two about my friend Mr. Timmins, who for many years was one of the leading lights of the town, a virtuoso, a Justice of the Peace, a capital after-dinner speaker, an authority on Baskerville the printer, and a favourite with every one. He was "Sam" always; like Lord Dundreary's brother, he "never had a 'uel." Among his more casual interests was one in Italian wines, then being introduced commercially into this country. Purely out of spontaneous zeal, and not with any expectation of personal gain, he gave a luncheon to make their merits more widely known, and George Augustus Sala, who happened to be staying with him at the time, was one of the company invited to pass judgment. In due course the feast progressed, and various still wines had already been sampled,



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with much smacking of lips, profoundly authoritative nods, and holding up of glasses to the light. Then our host, pouring out a sparkling beverage from a fresh bottle, and handing it to Sala, said : " There, Sala, taste that, it's an Asti wine." Sala " nosed " it, tasted it, swallowed some of it, and replied : " Yes, it is, a damned nasty wine." Sala would have his joke. Once when he was in America, one of the *nouveaux riches*, in the hope of seeing an appreciative column in the *Daily Telegraph*, invited him to a grand banquet at which every procurable delicacy in or out of season, and the best brands of wine, were served with ostentatious profusion. Sala did not like the patronising manner of the new Midas, still less did he like the hints given to him all through the meal as to what he should write about, and how he should write it. Two or three weeks later, his usual article appeared at home. It was a brightly-written chat about politics, books, wit, big-game shooting—anything, in fact, that had caught the journalist's vagrant fancy. At the very end was this sentence : " Mr. ——'s much-talked-of banquet took place on the fifteenth. Everything was cold except the ices."

I will not vouch for the American story. All I can say is that I have seen it in print. It seems to be a variant of a story told of Foote, who, returning one day from a nobleman's table, said in his caustic way, " Everything upon the table sour, except the vinegar—and *that* was sweet."

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The Sala version, although quite as acid, is neater.

Timmins, although he had not an atom of respect for believers in the Baconian heresy, was very broad-minded, and would have entertained with equal hospitality Sir Sidney Lee and Mrs. Gallup. He was above all things a reverent and whole-hearted Shakespearean. I can imagine the horror with which he would have regarded me if I had told him that when I played *Cassio* (see *ante*) I had been guilty, in "the drunken scene," of the enormity of bumping against one of the wings and saying with a solemn stutter, "I b-beg p-pardon, sir"; a gag in Shakespeare would have moved him infinitely more than the most violent republican rant.

Some of my readers may recollect *The Great Cryptogram*, a laboriously-arranged attempt, in two thick volumes, to prove that there is a cypher running through the first folio, in which the misprints as well as the proper text play a part, and that this cypher, when unravelled, makes remarkable disclosures about Queen Elizabeth, Lord Essex, Shakespeare himself, and Francis Bacon. I wrote a criticism of the book when it appeared, and spoke of it as a preposterous farrago of faked figures; the early edition of the paper containing this was already on sale, and I was just going out to lunch, when Timmins came into my room accompanied by a stranger. With a merry twinkle in his eye, he said: "Allow me

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to introduce you to Mr. Ignatius Donnelly." Mr. Ignatius Donnelly, the author of *The Great Cryptogram*! I was flabbergasted. I had, as the Americans say, "gone for him bald-headed," and here he was, in real flesh and blood, suddenly thrust upon me in circumstances not exactly conducive to a brotherly embrace. Fortunately, Donnelly himself had a sense of humour that quickly relieved the situation. "Well," he said, with an accent which the Pilgrim Fathers would hardly have recognised as being evolved from their own, "I see you've been pitching into me in your paper. All the papers do that. Of course, they cannot be expected to understand the cryptogram, until they have the key number." "But, Mr. Donnelly," I replied, "what's the good of publishing the book if it cannot be understood without a key, and at the same time you withhold the key?" "Now, my good friend," he said, "do you think it is possible for any human being to concoct a cypher which supplies a whole series of connected narratives as this one does?" "There," interposed Timmins, foreseeing an interminable wrangle, "it's no good you two arguing about it here. Perhaps you can both find time to meet, with the book before you, and discuss it carefully. Now, what do you say to a bit of lunch at the Arts Club and the calumet of peace to follow?" I don't think either of us was reluctant to abandon a controversy which on the available material could have led nowhere. Donnelly must

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have known perfectly well that his carefully-elaborated "discovery" was none the less a literary fraud because he had half-deceived himself with it. We had a pleasant lunch and an interesting chat—but not about the cryptogram. Both that and the equally impudent fabrication of Mrs. Gallup's are now practically forgotten, and Shakespeare is not yet dethroned.

Before Timmins moved into the country his house in Elvetham Road was a sort of Mecca for the principal actors and actresses of the touring companies, and they were always received with hospitality. Mrs. Timmins was a collector of old Staffordshire pottery, and her husband collected rare books. Between these two hobbies their house may be said to have been more than "completely furnished." In the reception-rooms the window-seats, mantelpieces, shelves, brackets and side-tables were crowded with quaint earthenware groups and figures in brilliant colours, cottages, and Toby-jugs. In the bedrooms the stacks of books piled on the floor made it difficult to move about. But the house was comfortable and interesting, and "a little dinner at Timmins's" (*vide* Thackeray) was one of the jolliest functions that can be imagined. For Timmins always contrived to gather interesting people around him, and the fun over the coffee and cigars often waxed fast and furious.

I am afraid that his business did not prosper towards the close of his life—he was a manu-



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facturer of steel toys—and that he had to cut down his expenses, a hard thing for such a generous-hearted man. The combination of commerce and literature rarely answers. It is a case of trying to serve two masters. Timmins was fond of writing and speaking, and was for years in the front rank of the public men of the town. He wrote most of the dramatic criticisms for the *Daily Post*, and he often contributed an essay to the *Mail*. A delightful article of his on Shakespeare's garden in apple-blossom time was worthy of a less ephemeral life. But steel toys would have been a better stand-by for him in the long run.

Another American writer I met in Birmingham was Bret Harte. He was visiting Edgar Pemberton, with whom he was collaborating on a play; and I was invited to meet him one day at lunch. His dress on that occasion wholly belied his modest nature. Although a quiet, unobtrusive gentleman, he had got himself up in a velvet coat and a crimson necktie with a big bow, that gave him the appearance of a showy villain in transpontine melodrama. It was only with difficulty that he could be persuaded to talk about himself or his work, but Pemberton skilfully led the way, and, with a graceful complaisance, he followed. After we had spoken of several of his best-known pieces, he turned to me and asked me which of his works I liked most. I unhesitatingly voiced my preference for *Dickens in Camp* in verse, and the *Outcasts of Poker Flat* in prose, and he gave a



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half-approving nod. "Yes," he said, "I think you're right. At any rate, about 'Poker Flat.' I always thought that that was the best thing I have ever done. It would not, however, be the general verdict. Not six people out of a hundred would agree with it. I fancy *The Luck of Roaring Camp* and *Truthful James* (*The Heathen Chinee*) would romp in easy winners." Pemberton, diplomatic courtier that he was, suggested that where there were so many pieces of practically equal merit, differences of judgment were to be expected. We had a very pleasant afternoon together, although the conversation was mostly on commonplace subjects and was distinguished by nothing very memorable. There was not a trace of the Wild West about Bret Harte, unless it was his *outré* costume, and no reminiscences of mining camp *argot* such as one might perhaps have hoped for. He was, in fact, a very simple, unpretentious, and altogether charming specimen of the American author.

I was very much attached to Edgar Pemberton, one of the dearest men I ever knew, and a painstaking, if not a brilliant, litterateur. But he once nearly severed our friendship. He told me of a vegetarian restaurant then recently opened, and begged me to come with him to sample its dishes. So far as my recollection goes, we had a rollicking banquet of cabbage and cold milk. I was very ill afterwards with acute dyspepsia. I could hardly breathe. I was distended and in insufferable pain,

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but managed to crawl as far as the Queen's Hotel. "Try a pint of champagne," Pemberton said. I tried a pint of champagne, and was a great deal worse. I thought I was dying; if it had not been for the horrible sensation of being a bottle of ginger-beer on the point of bursting I might even have begun to repent of my sins. Fortunately, a doctor known to Pemberton was in the hotel, and he instantly prescribed half a tumblerful of neat brandy. I managed to get it down, and in a few minutes—heavenly relief. I have never tried to be a vegetarian since. The diet is, I believe, an excellent one—for other people. I have heard of folks who became nonogenarians on raw carrots and nuts. I prefer not to be a nonogenarian on the terms. A tender, juicy point steak, or a cut from a well-hung roast leg of *pré-salé* mutton has more attractions for me than a whole field of swedes or cabbages. Poor Pemberton was very repentant. He tried his best a few days later to atone by standing me a real meal. I was not ill after it, and I forgave him.

## CHAPTER XVI

Local literary celebrities—Cardinal Newman's career—His skill in dialectics—Why I wrote a sketch of his life—Tennyson and his literary duel with Bulwer Lytton—Browning calls me a donkey.

Now that I am on literary subjects, it may be interesting to mention that I have often met Mr. J. H. Shorthouse, the author of *John Inglesant*, in the Exchange Coffee Room, where, after lunch, many business men smoked their cigars. He was a Birmingham manufacturer with exceptional literary gifts, and his first book, largely on the recommendation of Mr. Gladstone, bounded at one stride into the front row of high-class fiction. Mr. Shorthouse suffered from an impediment in his speech, which made conversation with him difficult and even painful. Great as was the sensation made by *John Inglesant* at the time—it ran into several editions—it may be questioned if many people read it nowadays, and if it will be even remembered a dozen years hence.

Going from one extreme to the other, I may put it on record that in 1885 I wrote a short biography of Cardinal Newman, who was then still alive. I was, I think, attracted to the subject by the dramatic character of two of the outstanding events in his career; not, certainly, because I had

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any leaning to the creed of which he was so distinguished an ornament. These events were his conflict with Father Achilli, a renegade from the Roman Church, and the trial for libel that ensued; and his controversy with Canon Kingsley which led directly to the publication of the famous *Apologia*. As examples of religious polemic, and, indeed, of polemic of any kind, it would be difficult to find anything more scathing, and at the same time, more polished. The quiet, suave, almost gentle way in which Cardinal Newman, in his original platform reference to Achilli, recounted one after another the immoralities of which the ex-priest had been accused, was something unusual in the fierce war then being waged between Romanism and Protestantism. It was smooth but deadly. And certainly on the indictment thus presented Achilli was a past master of libidinous hypocrisy. In the opinion of all impartial people, Newman proved his case up to the hilt when Achilli, compelled by public opinion, challenged him in the Law Courts. The verdict, however, in that atmosphere of Protestant prejudice, went the other way. A report of this *cause célèbre* is rare and difficult to obtain, but it is well worth reading, and it was partly the desire to present a fair summary of it that led me to undertake a sketch of the Cardinal's interesting life.

The *Apologia* originally appeared in parts, and when it was published in volume form all the

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earlier, controversial matter was omitted. These suppressed passages are nevertheless of perennial interest, for they show at their very best Father Newman's cunning fence and keen dialectical skill. I have no excuse for dilating on the subject here, for it has nothing to do with my personal reminiscences, but I cannot resist the temptation to quote Newman's summing-up of the controversy in one of the most brilliant passages in literature—

“ Mr. Kingsley begins then by exclaiming, ‘ Oh, the chicanery, the wholesale fraud, the vile hypocrisy, the conscience-killing tyranny of Rome ! We have not far to seek for an instance of it. There is Father Newman to wit ; one living specimen is worth a hundred dead ones. He, a priest, writing of priests, tells us that lying is never any harm ! ’

“ I interpose : ‘ You are taking a most extraordinary liberty with my name. If I have said this, tell me when and where.’

“ Mr. Kingsley replies : ‘ You said it, Reverend Sir, in a sermon which you preached when a Protestant as Vicar of St. Mary's, and published in 1844, and I could read you a very salutary lecture on the effects which that sermon had at the time on my own opinion of you.’

“ I make answer : ‘ Oh . . . *not*, it seems, as a priest speaking of priests ; but let us have the passage.’



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“ Mr. Kingsley relaxes. ‘ Do you know, I like your *tone*. From your *tone* I rejoice greatly to be able to believe that you did not mean what you said.’

“ I rejoined : ‘ *Mean* it ! I maintain I never *said* it, whether as a Protestant or as a Catholic.’

“ Mr. Kingsley replies : ‘ I waive that point.’

“ I object : ‘ Is it possible ? What ? Waive the main question ? I either said it, or I did not. You have made a monstrous charge against me, direct, distinct, public. You are bound to prove it as directly, as distinctly, as publicly, or to own you cannot.’

“ ‘ Well,’ says Mr. Kingsley, ‘ if you are quite sure you did not say it, I will take your word for it ; I really will.’

“ ‘ My word ! I am dumb. Somehow I think that it was my *word* that happened to be on trial. The *word* of a Professor of Lying that he does not *lie* ? ’

“ But Mr. Kingsley reassures me. ‘ We are both gentlemen,’ he says. ‘ I have done as much as one English gentleman can expect from another.’

“ I begin to see. He thought me a gentleman at the very time that he said I taught lying on system. After all, it is not I, but Mr. Kingsley, who did not mean what he said. *Habemus confitentem reum*. So we have confessedly come round to this, preaching without practising ; the common theme of satirists from Juvenal to Walter Scott. ‘ I left Baby Charles and Steenie

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laying his duty before him,' says King James of the reprobate Dalgarno. 'Oh, Geordie, jingling Geordie, it was grand to hear Baby Charles laying down the guilt of dissimulation and Steenie lecturing on the turpitude of incontinence.' "

My *Life*, as I have said, was only a sketch, for I had no intimate knowledge of the subject. On only one occasion had I spoken with Dr. Newman, and then the conversation was limited to a few ordinary civilities at a performance of the *Phormio* of Terence by the pupils at the Edgbaston Oratory. When my MS. was finished I wrote and asked him if, to ensure accuracy, he would permit one of his colleagues to revise it, but his reluctance to sanction, even indirectly, views that were necessarily irresponsible, led him very naturally to refuse. A year or two later, however, he caused to be conveyed to me a message in which, while justifying his former attitude, he corroborated what had already been said by Gladstone (in a letter published at the time) as to the fairness that characterised my little book, and added that it was much appreciated. I only heard Newman preach once, and then he was an old man, physically feeble. His sermon was really in the nature of a homily, and well described by the poet's phrase "Simple, grave, sincere." It had no relationship to those masterpieces of pulpit eloquence that he preached at Oxford many years before.

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Another life I wrote on similar lines was that of Tennyson. At first intended to be an extension of Sheppard's *Bibliography*, the material grew until there was enough for an octavo volume; and again I thought I ought to submit the MS. to the subject of the sketch for revision. Here I was more fortunate. Miss A. Weld, Tennyson's private secretary, was the medium of communication, and after keeping the MS. for some time, she returned it with a few valuable alterations and enriched with several new anecdotes. When the book was published, a captious critic seized upon these very anecdotes supplied by the family, if not by Tennyson himself, to show that I had committed the grave indiscretion of violating private confidences.

I did not adopt one alteration that was most certainly suggested by Lord Tennyson himself. This was to omit the verses he wrote in *Punch* in reply to a literary attack by Bulwer Lytton (afterwards Lord Lytton). Bulwer had produced a metrical satire called "The New Timon," in which he contemptuously referred to Tennyson as "Miss Alfred," and bantered him on his "darling rooms" and conceits "out-Keatsing Keats." The Laureate's warmest admirers will be constrained to admit that some of the verses of his early manhood were namby-pambyish, and spoilt by a studied super-elegance of phrase. But there was no need to pick out these blemishes and make them the staple of unfriendly comment.

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Bulwer, however, got more than he bargained for. "Miss Alfred" hit back and hit mighty hard. The reply was printed anonymously in *Punch*, and I quote two or three verses of it here to show that Tennyson could write strong, bitter things as well as sugary ones—

" . . . here comes the New (Timon).  
Regard him, a familiar face :  
I thought we knew him : What, it's you,  
The padded man that wears the stays.

\* \* \* \* \*

What profits now to understand  
The merits of a spotless shirt—  
A dapper boot—a little hand—  
If half the little soul is dirt ?

*You* talk of tinsel ! Why, we see  
The old mark of rouge upon your cheeks.  
*You* prate of Nature ! you are he  
That spilt his life about the cliques.

A Timon you !. Nay, nay, for shame :  
It looks too arrogant a jest—  
The fierce old man—to take his name,  
You bandbox. Off, and let him rest."

The following week he wrote another short piece excusing himself for having allowed his feelings to be ruffled by one of the "little gods of rhyme." I felt it was impossible to ignore an incident like this. The biographer of a literary man cannot pick and choose his material, he must take the recorded facts, even if the subject of the *Life* wants them forgotten. It is true that during his lifetime Tennyson never allowed the verses to appear in any of the collected editions of his works ; but that was the result of a

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chivalrous impulse which no biographer could be reasonably expected to share.

A second and cheaper edition of the *Life* was published within a few days of the poet's death. It served its purpose as a stop-gap pending the official biography that subsequently appeared from the pen of the present Lord Tennyson. Mr. Gladstone, to whom a copy of the first edition had been sent, acknowledged it in a generously complimentary way on one of his economical postcards. Many months afterwards, Mr. Theodore Watts-Dunton, into whose hands the sketch had fallen, wrote me quite spontaneously an even more flattering letter. It would be affectation to say that I did not appreciate these kind judgments.

At one time I contemplated writing something about Ruskin, but this subject, on account of its limitations of incident, did not greatly appeal to me. I had met Ruskin at the house of a local alderman, and he was a very affable, although somewhat dogmatic, personality. I had previously had some correspondence with him about the educational movements in which he was interested, and this served as the basis of a conversation in which he amplified his well-known views, or, at any rate, emphasised them. He was alive even then—it was, I think, in the late 'seventies—to the dangerous tendencies of plutocratism, and expressed himself with considerable vigour. "All this ambition for wealth starves



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the people's souls"; "A rich man who pays great prices for works of Art simply to outshine others, degrades Art, he does nothing to elevate it"; "Ostentation is not a passport to the Kingdom of Heaven"; and "All men are equal in the sight of God, but Man himself sees things from a different angle, hence, in this world, equality is non-existent, and if it were imposed by statute to-day, it would be trodden underfoot to-morrow," are some of detached fragments of his talk at the dinner-table, but they are hardly intelligible, as he would have had them understood, without the connecting links of the conversation. What struck me most about Ruskin was his intense, almost passionate, earnestness. He seemed to take everything in a terribly serious spirit. As far as one could judge from an acquaintance of only a few hours' duration, he had little or no sense of humour, and was quite blind to the everlasting comedy that was going on around him. Yet the man who said he would put Lear's *Book of Nonsense* at the head of the hundred best books cannot have been lacking in humour.

Before I pass from these literary jottings, I must, in all humility, refer to an encounter with the great Robert Browning. In an article on his work, I had presumed to say something about his obscurities of style, a characteristic that has been recognised and regretted by many of his greatest admirers. Some local disciple, I suppose, sent him the article and invited his opinion thereon.

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Browning must have eaten something that disagreed with him, or he would scarcely have condescended to discuss such a small matter. His reply was short and pointed—very pointed. He said, in effect, that there was no accounting for the vagaries of a donkey. By some means this complimentary letter came into my hands. Instead of being abashed, as I ought to have been, I wrote another article, quoting the fiery poet's contemptuous phrase and suggesting that the invective of so scholarly a writer might, with advantage, have taken a more polished form. I might, perhaps, have quoted Mr. (now Lord) Morley's rebuke to Lord Randolph Churchill when he told him that if he could find nothing more humorous or witty to say than that an opponent was "a donkey" he was in great straits indeed. The incident did not prevent me from afterwards becoming President of a small Browning Society, but I have never recanted the opinion that provoked the ire of his "celestial mind," and I never shall recant it. Browning, great poet and thinker though he is, *is* obscure.

## CHAPTER XVII

Literary societies in Birmingham—A Shakespearean bill of fare—  
Famous Birmingham journalists—"A Bad Lot"—The  
Owls' Club—Some unfulfilled hopes.

ONE of the distinctive features of Birmingham was its intellectual life. Most of the leading men were big manufacturers, but they were men of culture as well; several of them were refined and eloquent speakers. There were three or four societies specially organised for the study of literary subjects, and each of them had a large membership of men engaged prominently in business. Perhaps the principal was "Our Shakespeare Club," whose semi-public dinners on the anniversary of the dramatist's birth were always remarkable for the high tone of the after-dinner oratory. They were also remarkable for the literary character of the menus and toast programmes, which I cannot indicate better than by giving the text of the one for April 23, 1880—

### THE BILL OF FARE

"The feast fmells well."—*Coriolanus*, IV. v.

*Soups.*

Mock Turtle and Clear Oxtail.

"That's meat and drink to me."—*Merry Wives of Windsor*, I. i.

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## *Fish.*

Salmon. Fillet Soles.

"From Trent and Severn hitherto."—*Henry IV.*, III. i.

"There is *falmons* in both."—*Henry V.*, IV. vii.

"Sole *fir* o' the world."—*Anthony and Cleopatra*, V. ii.

## *Entrées.*

Sweetbreads. Mutton Cutlets. Stewed Kidneys.

"The dainties that are bred."—*Love's Labour Lost*, IV. ii.

"Would eat mutton on Fridays."—*Measure for Measure*, III. ii.

## *Removes.*

Lamb. Sirloin of Beef. Saddle of Mutton. Tongues.  
Roast and Boiled Chickens.

"Not a man shall pass his quarter."—*Timon of Athens*, V. vi.

"I am a great eater of beef."—*Twelfth Night*, I. iii.

"I have no tongue, *fir*."—*Henry IV.* II., ii.

## *Entremets.*

Ducklings and Green Peas. Tamercans.

"O dainty duck ! O dear !"—*Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. i.

## *Sweets.*

Soufflet and Cabinet Puddings. Lemon Cream, Jellies,  
Blancmanges, Ices.

"Blessed Pudding."—*Othello*, II. i.

"To jelly with the act of fear."—*Hamlet*, I. ii.

"A piece of ice."—*Taming of the Shrew*, IV. i.

"Biting cold."—*Henry VI.*, III. ii.

## *Deffert.*

# PROGRAMME OF TOASTS

## The Queen.

"May honourable peace attend thy throne."—*2 Henry VI.*, II. iii.

## The Immortal Memory of William Shakespeare.

"His good remembrance lies richer in your thoughts than on his tomb."—*All's Well that Ends Well*, I. ii.

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Song from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

The Readers of Shakespeare.

"Make his books thine eyes."—*Passionate Pilgrim*,

The Players of Shakespeare.

"See the players well bestowed."—*Hamlet*, II. ii.

Ditty from *As You Like It*.

The Illustrators of Shakespeare.

"My endeavours have ever come too short of my desires."—  
*Henry VIII.*, III. ii.

The Editors and Printers of Shakespeare.

"We quarrel in print by the book."—*As You Like It*, V. iv.

"Thou hast caused printing to be used."—*2 Henry VI.*, IV. vii.

Clown's Song from *Twelfth Night*.

*The Chairman.*

The Central Literary Association was another useful institution. It had debating nights and lecture nights, and it published an excellent little magazine, the work of its members. I lectured to the Association once on "Critics and Criticism," and the paper was afterwards expanded into a volume and published under the title of *Curiosities of Criticism* in the Mayfair Library series. I mention it because it was the first book I wrote, and because the critics, when there was much provocation to do otherwise, dealt gently with it.

There were some brilliant journalists in Birmingham in my time. Mr. J. T. Bunce, the doyen of the local Press, was a man of wide accomplishments and a writer of much force. He edited



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the *Daily Post* so ably that no other morning paper could even approach it, either in influence or circulation. Christie Murray began his literary career as a reporter on the staff of the *Birmingham Morning News*, edited by George Dawson. I think his first big score was in connexion with the Pelsall Colliery Explosion, when many lives were lost. He joined one of the rescue parties, crawled about in the shattered workings in imminent danger of asphyxia from after-damp, and wrote a thrilling narrative of his experience. When the paper stopped—through its owner getting tired of financing it—Murray found his way to London. He had already written one or two serial stories for local publication. One of them entitled “A Bad Lot” was extensively, if carelessly, advertised by the managers of the paper, and all the principal hoardings bore the self-depreciatory announcement—

*The Morning News*

“A Bad Lot.”

affording much merriment to the wags. Murray had a long and bitter struggle in London, the story of which he told in a strangely moving human document; but the tide turned at last, his novels became popular, and he might have gained a much higher position but for domestic troubles, and a too ardent spirit of sociability. When he lived in Birmingham we were both members of the

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“Owls’ Club,” a very Bohemian gathering of young men connected for the most part with morning papers, and therefore of necessarily nocturnal habits. There were some lively meetings in the basement that formed the club’s premises, and many of the members did their best to justify the club’s name. “The chimes at midnight” were often only the prelude to their diversions. Having to begin work at half-past eight in the morning, which meant getting up at seven, I could not be a frequent participator in these festivities, but I went there oftener, and stayed there longer, than I should have done. I feel inclined, on looking back at those convivial meetings, where there was the “flow of soul” if the “feast of reason” was absent, to exclaim with Justice Shallow: “O, the mad days that I have spent! and to see how many of my old acquaintances are dead!”

Another young man of great promise in the latter part of the ’eighties was William—generally called “Billy”—Vince. He was a son of a popular Nonconformist minister, and before taking up journalism had practised as a solicitor. His first newspaper contributions were in the form of cricket notes for the *Mail*; notes that were so picturesque and witty, and so sound in judgment, that the proprietors of the *Daily Post* snapped him up with a view to training him for the reversion of the editorship of that journal. He was, if ever there was, a born journalist. He not only

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had the indispensable flair, but also a delightfully facile and playfully pointed style. Unfortunately, just when he had more than justified the high hopes of his friends, he fell a victim to typhoid fever, and left literary Birmingham the poorer by his early death. Another journalist who died all too soon was W. C. Sullivan, first my assistant, and subsequently my successor in the editorial chair of the *Mail*. He was a gifted leader writer, with a rich equipment of humour, but I am inclined to think that his greatest quality was his fine scent for good copy and his genius for ferreting out exclusive news. Another of my young men on the *Mail* has won his spurs in the fiercer competition of London—Charles Hands, whose whimsical way of looking at things has often enlivened the columns of the London *Daily Mail*. H. G. Hibbert has also won distinction by his authorship of *Fifty Years of a Londoner's Life*, one of the most interesting books about theatres and music-halls that ever was written; and I might name others who have done credit to their Birmingham training, and who do not look back altogether with unforgiving eyes on the Chief who, if exacting in his requirements, was always ready to give every man his chance.

And there were, from time to time, others whose careers were less distinguished—whose stories, indeed, were painful and sad. There was Charley G——, for instance, a very promising young fellow with a knack of felicitous phrase, who

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reported for the *Mail*. He was clever, but wanted balance. He went the pace, and the pace killed him. There was Hector Macneil, who, after being initiated into journalism under my editorship, joined a sporting paper in London, and was beginning to make a name for himself as a vivid descriptive writer when he met with a tragic and mysterious death. He was sent to France to report a big prize fight, and on his way back, after having boarded the steamer in Boulogne harbour, abruptly left her to go on shore for some unknown purpose. The vessel sailed without him, and later his dead body was found on the seashore. Whether he fell into the water, or was done to death by some of the scoundrels who used to infest the purlieus of the harbour, or, doubtful of his ability to produce his copy up to time, had lost his head and taken his own life, was never definitely ascertained. Chris. Murray, one of his closest friends, always declared that Macneil was murdered, but I am bound to say the evidence was very inconclusive. His body was removed to Birmingham, and at the funeral the streets of the locality in which his parents lived were lined with sympathising spectators, many of whom had been readers of his work when on the *Mail*.

Yet another of the lost brigade was D. G——, a young Scots sub-editor, whom Nature had cruelly handicapped with a congenital spinal deformity. He was a decent little fellow and a

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good worker most of the time. But he had his failing, the usual one. All hope of his reformation was at an end when he fell in love with a barmaid, and spent his evenings in the bar, drinking whisky all the time, in order to be near her. He had had several warnings at the office, and he knew that the next breakdown would not be overlooked, and that his position hung, so to speak, by a thread. The end came, however, in another way. The lady behind the bar did not reciprocate his feelings, and told him that she would be glad to be relieved of his attentions. That, and the insecurity of his tenure, brought on a final burst of indulgence, and then a fatal dose of poison.

He left a letter for me in which was this pathetic sentence: "As the weeds are pulled from the gardens of earth, so do I tear myself from the garden of life."



## CHAPTER XVIII

A sad downfall—The dynamite discovery—Actors and actresses  
—Sothorn's champion—Moral condemnation fills the theatre  
—A laconic criticism—An indignant manager flourishes a  
horsewhip.

A JOURNALIST who comes into contact with all sorts of people almost necessarily makes the acquaintance of many who are not exactly what they seem to be. When I look back to those Birmingham days, I cannot help recalling some of the cases of well-known, and even prominent, men who fell from their estate through dishonesty. You expect to rub up against potential criminals in cosmopolitan London, but when you dine with a public official, or a leading citizen, in a steady-going, respectable, provincial city, you do not suspect that he is a wolf in sheep's clothing, and already qualifying to appear in the dock. Birmingham was no worse than other places—there is always a proportion of these sly wrong-doers in every community—but I was closer to the picture. I knew several of the offenders intimately. I have had my knees under the mahogany of some of them, and I have had to comment publicly on their subsequent misdeeds.

I have no intention of disinterring these forgotten scandals of the past, but there is one affair

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I will mention as vaguely as I can, on account of its sequel. A young man of ability and promise held a public appointment in connexion with an important local undertaking. He was well liked, appreciated by his superiors, and regarded with envy by many who coveted his post and his popularity. He had a weakness for giving little dinner-parties, at which everything was choice and expensive. But as he had a good salary nobody wondered. At last the crash came. He was detected in a systematic scheme of embezzlement, prosecuted, and sent to a term of penal servitude.

That was the end of the first act. A good many years passed, during which I had almost forgotten his existence. One day I was walking in the Bayswater Road, when crawling along by the park railings, were half-a-dozen sandwich-men, carrying the poster-boards of a new play. As I was passing, one of them, a ragged, unkempt object, looked at me so earnestly that I could not help returning his gaze. His drink-sodden features recalled nobody, and suggested nothing. Still he looked at me, and his look indicated recognition; at the same time he slipped out of his proper place in the procession and dropped to the rear, inviting me with his eye to keep near him. "You don't remember me?" he said. "Indeed I do not. Who are you?" I replied. "Well, I'm not proud of the name, as you may guess; I'm ——" "Good Heavens!" I exclaimed, for I was completely taken by surprise, and then I remembered

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what he was like when I saw him last. "Yes," he added, "it's a come-down, isn't it? I don't have many people to dinner now. You used to come once on a time, but I'm afraid the *ménu* in present circumstances would be unattractive, and possibly the silver and glass would run short"; and so he chattered on in a sardonic vein for a little while. To tell the truth, I did not care for this conversation *coram populo*, but I did not like to hurt the poor devil's feelings by abruptly moving away. "Can I do anything for you?" I asked. "No—and yes. You can't lift me out of this. It's not a very classy job, but there's no responsibility attached to it, and—blessed thing—it does not lead one into temptation. No, if I were offered the Governorship of the Bank of England to-morrow, I'm afraid I should have to decline it. So don't bother yourself to ask for my references. Stay, there's one thing you can do for me," looking half-doubtfully, half-slyly into my face. "And that is?" I said. "*The price of a pint.*" That was the wretched man's only wish—his last ambition: the price of a pint! I slipped half-a-crown into his dirty hand and hurried away into the Park to moralise on life's whirligig changes.

In the year 1884, the Fenian conspiracy made a great noise in the country. There had been several dynamite outrages, and the authorities were puzzled to know where the dynamite was manufactured. One morning the public were startled with the intelligence that two men, Daly

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and Egan, had been arrested at a house in Ledsam Street, Birmingham, having been caught red-handed engaged in making the explosive. They were taken before the magistrates, committed for trial, and in due course, in company with a third who was captured later, were convicted and sentenced to long terms of penal servitude. The full credit of the discovery was given to the local detectives, and nothing came out to associate any one else with it.

This, however, was not a strictly accurate version of what happened. The first step in the discovery was actually taken by a member of the *Mail* staff. He chanced to hear from a resident in Ledsam Street that there was something mysterious about the movements of two men whose visits to the house seemed to be furtive and suspicious. This informant thought it possible that they might be "smashers"—that is, makers of counterfeit coin. My colleague, always on the alert for a newspaper sensation, consulted me, and with my assent undertook an investigation on his own account.

After some spying, and watching the comings and goings of the men, he contrived to get a closer look at what was going on, but not knowing anything about the ingredients of dynamite, or the processes of its manufacture, he did not guess the nature of the men's occupation. Still, he was sure that there was something underhanded that ought to be inquired into officially, and we then

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decided to let the police know of his suspicions. The detectives at once jumped to the true explanation, watched the house, and at a convenient time made an entrance and found all the materials and paraphernalia of a considerable dynamite factory.

It was highly desirable that the *Mail* staff should not be publicly connected with the affair, and especially desirable that the name of the reporter should not be made known. I therefore consulted the proprietors of the paper, and they agreed with me that our contribution to the discovery must not be mentioned, either in the paper itself or in the courts, and the two detectives engaged readily fell in with this view. Their evidence was consequently confined to the usual "from information received," and to their own very clever and effective observations, and this is, I believe, the first time that the story of my colleague's activity has been told.

He is now dead, the then proprietors of the *Mail* are dead, the principal detective is dead, and, for all I know, the criminals may be dead, and no harm can result from throwing this little ray of light upon one of the most sensational political crimes of the last century.

I still kept up my connexion with the theatre, and wrote most of the *Mail* dramatic criticisms between 1870 and 1885. During the twenty years I lived in the Midlands I was a regular theatre-goer, all the more regular, no doubt, because the privilege of free admission was accorded to me as a member



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of the Press. To give a list of names only of the actresses and actors with whom I had some degree of acquaintance would take up half a newspaper column. Such a list would include Adelaide Neilson, the most beautiful actress, with the most pathetic life history, that a long experience can recall; Ellen Terry, Madame Modjeska, Geneviève Ward, Sarah Bernhardt, Mdlle. Beatrice, Charles Matthews, Wilson Barrett, E. A. Sothern, Leonard Boyne, Mary Anderson, Buckstone, H. J. Byron, Emily Soldene, Julia Matthews, Jefferson, Barry Sullivan, Mrs. Bernard Beere, Lionel Brough, Charles Calvert, W. H. Kendal, Henry Irving, Booth, J. L. Toole, Salvini, and the Billingtons. I had known Sothern in London in 1862, when he was in the full glory of his triumph as Lord Dundreary, and was several times his guest at supper in the old Café de l'Europe, next door to the Haymarket Theatre. That performance of Dundreary was the most exquisite piece of fooling I have ever seen. Sothern created the part, building it up bit by bit, and although it was a caricature rather than a character, it was worthy to take rank with the brightest creations of the comic stage.

When he played in Birmingham I always gave him of my best until, on an ill-advised day, he produced "The Crushed Tragedian," and played the leading part, for the benefit of J. C. Smith, the stage manager of the Theatre Royal.

The performance was in reality in the nature of a trial trip, with a view to a London production.

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I thought Sothern failed to do himself justice, and in as kind a way as I could, I said so. He acknowledged the justice of my criticism, both then and later, when the chief newspapers of London had given a similar verdict. But J. C. Smith, the one-night benefi-*ciare*, was furious. He was a short, tubby man with a ferocious moustache, and the next night he assailed me in the foyer of the theatre with a volley of abuse that would have made a bargee envious, and informed me that if Mr. Sothern did not take some punitive action in the matter, he should do so himself. I should rather like to know what were his innermost feelings when an hour or two afterwards he had the discomfiture of seeing me engaged in friendly and even hilarious chat with the actor whom he had accused me of treating with gross injustice and personal animus. Poor Smith! he had an aggressive manner and few friends; and not many years after, having quarrelled with Mercer Simpson, the manager of the theatre, he fell by the wayside and died, I have heard, in actual poverty.

In its dramatic criticisms, the *Mail* was always "on the side of the angels," that is, it was for clean, wholesome drama. Its censure fell heavily on risky situations, salacious *doubles entendres*, and Continental displays of high kicking. It was, indeed, easily shocked, or felt it to be its duty to the public to be shocked. Mdlle. Sara's exhibition of so-called dancing, which had about it a distinct flavour of the Moulin Rouge in its "rougiest"

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days, was denounced with an indignation that had the effect of filling the Theatre Royal for the rest of the engagement. The "great Macdermott's" boisterously vulgar songs, some of which, if they were not indecent were meaningless, were censured, and his tuney blast of "By Jingoism" was scolded in accordance with the Liberal attitude in foreign politics, and this although he was the comic mainstay of an expensively-produced pantomime. The lessee of the theatre trembled until he found that the popular taste declined to let itself be shaped to newspaper standards of propriety.

I fancy that the most laconic critique that ever appeared in print was one I wrote on a production at the local Prince of Wales's Theatre. It ran thus—

"Last night a play called 'Pure as Snow' was produced at the Broad Street Theatre. It is not as pure as snow."

Perhaps it was not, but I think the antithesis had more to do with the paragraph than anything outrageously objectionable in the play.

I am quite aware that this is a dangerous incident to record. It suggests the snappy possibilities of terseness in literary as well as in dramatic criticism. It might, for instance, be applied by some impish reviewer, keen on labour-saving methods and a severe economy of phrase, to the title I have given this book. Just half a line to say the book is appropriately named and you have withering

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condemnation, caustic rebuke and the very super-essence of a sneer packed up in the smallest compass. And the author, as he writhes under the prick of such compendious censure, has the mortification of knowing that he "nurs'd the pinion that impelled the steel."

Whether all this slashing and smashing did any good, is doubtful. My experience is, that if you tell the public a piece is not fit to be put on the stage all that you ensure is "Standing Room Only."

When on the subject of criticism I may perhaps refer to a little incident in the early days of the *Mail*. One morning, Captain Disney Roebuck, who toured with a company of half-trained amateurs, came to the editorial room armed with a riding-whip, and said that he was going to thrash somebody for holding his entertainment up to what he considered was undeserved ridicule. I pleaded guilty to being the offending party. "Then I shall give you a damned good hiding!" said the Captain, and flourished his crop. "That's all right," I replied, "we're used to that sort of thing here. But will you excuse me one minute before you begin?" Hereupon I put the speaking tube to my mouth and asked the foreman printer if he would be good enough to step down for a moment. He quickly appeared, and I said to him: "Mr. Barker, how long will it take you to get ready a special edition?" "Couldn't be done under an hour, sir," he answered, "even if we lifted an

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extra lot from the *Post*." "That'll do," I said, "go ahead as fast as you can; this gentleman's going to assault me, and as soon as he's finished, I'll give you a twenty-line paragraph to be set in double-leaded type." Then I turned smilingly to the Captain, and invited him to begin. Instead of "calling my bluff," he burst out laughing, and said: "Well, you're a cool hand, come and have a drink." And we went.



## CHAPTER XIX

A doleful supper-party—A great theatrical event—Charles Calvert  
—His breakdown on the stage—The memorial benefit at  
Manchester—Helen Faucit's *Rosalind*—Centenary of the  
Birmingham Theatre Royal.

ON a forgotten date in the early 'seventies, I was a guest at a supper given by Irving. On the last night but one of an engagement in Birmingham, he invited ten or a dozen of the members of the local Press to a supper at the historic Hen and Chickens Hotel, then still existing in New Street. From one cause and another none of my confrères were able to come, and I was the solitary journalist who responded to the invitations. The rest of the company were our host, Mr. James Rodgers, then lessee and manager of the Prince of Wales Theatre, and Mr. H. J. Loveday, Irving's business manager. The Coffee Room did duty as the banqueting-hall, but it was so large that the dining-table, although laid for twelve, was like a little island in an ocean. Irving sat at one end and Rodgers at the other, while Loveday and I found ourselves equidistant from both. Something like a chill was given to the feast by the sight of so many vacant places, and the oysters and pheasants were eaten with a sombre decorum

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that even old-landed champagne could not appreciably lighten. Supper over, Irving rose solemnly, and in a flattering speech, made more generous by his fine, witty smile, proposed the health of "his dear friend, Jimmy Rodgers." Rodgers responded at length, and then proposed the health of "his dear friend, Henry Irving." Irving acknowledged the raising of three obedient glasses, and then gave "the Press" in very pretty terms, and coupled my name with the toast; but I did not see any fun in this farce of orating to three, and simply said, "Gentlemen, on behalf of the Press, I thank you." Then Irving proposed Loveday's health, Loveday proposed "the Stage," Rodgers proposed "Shakespeare," and Irving gave the health and prosperity of Birmingham, Rodgers replying for the stage, but Shakespeare and Birmingham finding no spokesmen.

Nor did this end the impromptu programme. These incorrigible talkers, especially Irving and Rodgers, continually found some fresh pretext for being on their feet, until about four in the morning exhausted Nature gave out, Rodgers fell asleep with his head on the table, Irving maundered to himself, and I, wearied beyond measure with the dreariest evening I think I have ever spent, made my adieux and set forth in the raw morning air for a three-mile walk to my home in the suburbs. I cannot even now think patiently of those unending toasts, drunk to the accompaniment of a clinking of glasses, and of the acrobatic dexterity

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required to clink them when the distances to be bridged were so considerable, and our hands, after such a trying vigil, were not perhaps as steady as they ought to have been.

I have already made brief reference to another, and a very different, supper given by Irving on the stage of the Lyceum Theatre after the hundredth performance of "The Merchant of Venice." Nearly all the men eminent in Art, Science and Literature were there; it was, indeed, a brilliant company. My friends Sam Timmins and Rodgers and myself were invited as representing Birmingham, and we were the least of that starry host. Lord Houghton, who presided, made a playful reference to Irving's new and softened reading of *Shylock*, and Irving wittily defended his view. It was, I think, the most memorable meal I ever sat down to, and to show the host's care for the smallest detail, every guest was presented with the acting edition of the play bound in vellum.

Calvert was another of my theatrical friends. I first met him at a Sunday dinner-party at Rodgers's. He had been playing Shakespearean parts during the week at Rodgers's Theatre. One of his characters was *Lear*, and it struck me at the time that he was over-taxing his strength in the more vehement passages. I thought his ending of the play, although according to the text, was rather in the nature of an anti-climax, and suggested that it would be more effective to end with Kent's words—

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' Vex not his ghost : O, let him pass ! he hates him  
That would upon the rack of this tough world  
Stretch him out longer."

He at once adopted the suggestion, much, I think, to the advantage of the impressive solemnity of the closing tableau.

Not many months later, Calvert broke down in the middle of a performance on the stage in Birmingham. I do not think I have ever witnessed a more painful scene. He was in visible distress for some time, and it culminated at last in his tottering towards the footlights, dropping on his knees, and, in a sort of hysterical outburst, announcing that he was dying. The audience were greatly upset. The other actors on the stage did not know what to do, and there was nothing for it but to drop the curtain and bring the performance to an abrupt end. Calvert was undoubtedly very ill, suffering from over-work and mental strain, and this almost tragic collapse was a grave symptom of deep-seated trouble. I have been in a theatre when there was an alarm of fire and a struggling, panic-stricken stampede for the doors; again when a notorious criminal, who was arrested in the stalls, fought with his captors and pointed a revolver at them; again when an angry critic in front declaimed against the tendency of the play and a great hubbub ensued, but I have never experienced such a shock as that caused by poor Calvert's stricken form and despairing cry.

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His illness ultimately brought to a close a career of distinction as a producer of Shakespearean revivals. He greatly improved the fortunes of the Manchester theatre with which he was for some years associated, but he nevertheless died in straitened circumstances. An influential Manchester committee was formed to organise a benefit performance. "As You Like It" was the selected play, and Helen Faucit (Lady Theodore Martin) came out of her retirement to play *Rosalind* on the first night, and Ellen Wallis played it on the second. All the male parts were sustained by amateurs. Tom Taylor (then editor of *Punch*) was *Adam*, the Hon. Lewis Wingfield *Orlando*, A. Darbyshire *Jacques*, Napier Hemy *Le Beau*, Herman Merivale *Touchstone*, Linley Sambourne *Corin*, Edwin Waugh *First Forester*, and George du Maurier, J. D. Watson and John Hollingshed *Lords attending on the Banished Duke*. I was honoured by an invitation from the Committee to represent Birmingham on the occasion, and took the part of *Duke Frederick*. The theatre was packed on both nights and the pecuniary results were very satisfactory. On the days of the rehearsals and performances we were fêted as probably few bodies of amateurs except those of the Guild of Literature and Art had been fêted before. There were luncheons and suppers every day, and Manchester's "cotton kings" vied with each other in showing us a profuse and refined hospitality. Arthur Mathison and myself were



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put up for the week by George Faulkner, whose beautiful house at Altrincham was rich in artistic treasures. This Manchester visit was altogether a delightful one and was a pleasant memory to me for many long years.

I had several interesting conversations with Lady Martin about the Shakespearean heroines she had played. She admitted that she was hardly young enough to personate the girlish gaiety of Rosalind as she had done during her professional career. There may have been traces of unsuitable maturity, both of manner and spirit, in the forest scenes, where Rosalind is in the dress and character of Ganymede; but, on the other hand, there was an entire absence of the hoydenishness and strain of assumed masculinity that some other famous actresses have employed.

I always thought that Adelaide Neilson's otherwise perfect Rosalind was marred by her over-affectation of modesty in pretending to hide her legs with the short skirt of her doublet. Lady Martin avoided these arts of the theatre, and invested the character with a delicacy and refinement that fully atoned for any shortcomings due to a little stiffness and formality in her assumption of girlhood. It was a gracious and beautiful performance when seen only from the "wings," and it must have been more gracious and beautiful to the vast audience with a full view of the stage.

My last appearance on the stage was in the character of *Cheviot Hill* in Gilbert's "Engaged"

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at the Centenary Celebration of the Birmingham Theatre Royal. *Cheviot Hill* is a sprightly gentleman who makes love to every woman he sees, and gets himself into a veritable tangle of philandering. For all of them he has the same hyperbolical formula : " You are the tree upon which the fruit of my heart is growing, you are my Past, my Future and my own To Come." The play ripples from first to last with Gilbertian topsy-turvy humour, and in the hands of amateurs with a fair amount of experience it " plays itself."

This event was interesting because my confrères of the daily and weekly Press had assembled in force at the theatre, to find out for themselves if my presumption in tackling a part that had been made famous both by George Honey and H. J. Byron was justified or not. They all had on their most critical spectacles, and sat in the seats of judgment as if waiting for the criminal to be brought in. Some of them, not too friendly perhaps, " willing to wound," and hopeful of an opportunity for hinting a fault here and there, spent the time until the curtain rose in figuratively sharpening their knives. At least, that was how I pictured them. But I had no need to be apprehensive. Everything went smoothly. The performance was a success, and the notices the next day were generous to the last degree. When I say " everything went smoothly," I should add " to all appearances." There was a critical moment in the final scene : the lady from London

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who played *Belinda Treherne* having forgotten her part. Fortunately I knew the whole scene by heart, and was able to avert what would have been a ruinous pause with the prompter intervening, by catching up her unspoken cue and going on with the answer to it. She was a charming lady, and played the character very well in the earlier acts, but I think some good-natured friends had been persuading her that champagne was an excellent drink to give confidence ; hence the lapse of memory.

## CHAPTER XX

Rival archdeacons—A laureate's fee—Music-hall celebrities—  
Confessions of an autograph hunter—A change of editorship  
—Lord Randolph Churchill—Belated regrets.

BRANDON THOMAS, who long afterwards wrote "Charley's Aunt," was another of my actor friends. When I first made his acquaintance, he was playing minor parts with the Kendals, and his powers of characterisation were already conspicuous. We became good friends, and he occasionally spent a Sunday at Handsworth Wood, when within easy reach of Birmingham, and entertained us with his dialect recitations. His name reminds me of a singular coincidence. Mrs. Bernard Beere and Charley Brookfield, then on tour, were lunching with me one day, and Charley told this story: Brandon Thomas, when travelling by train, was accosted by a fellow-passenger who said, "Excuse me, sir, but are you the Archdeacon of ——?" Brandon disclaimed the honour. "Sorry, sir; if you had been I was going to ask you to speak at a meeting we're getting up to encourage the reform of the Stage." Brandon was still more emphatic in repudiating archidiaconal dignity. "Well, all I can say, sir, is that you're the very image of him; in face, I mean, sir; *no doubt in character you're his exact opposite.*" A few days

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later I ran up against Brandon Thomas in London, and over a glass of something fruity "from the wood" he told me the very same story, only making Charley Brookfield the hero of it. As there was no sort of resemblance between the two actors, and they were hardly, if at all, acquainted with each other, it either follows that there were two Archdeacons with worldly doubles, or that our old friend Ben Trovato had been ringing the changes.

Poor Mrs. Bernard Beere! She rose to fame suddenly; I believe she was a barmaid before going on the stage. She had some of the qualities of a fine emotional actress, but the lack of early training was revealed in angularities that the most conscientious art could not wholly hide. Some years later she had a bad shaking in the Slough railway accident, but even before that her stage career was virtually over. It had been to some extent distinguished by her production of Tennyson's "Promise of May," although there was a disorderly scene on the first night owing to a freethinker's protest against the author's opinions. Tennyson's connection with Mrs. Bernard Beere gave rise to the *jeu d'esprit*: "the Laureates of old wrote for wine; now they write for *Beere*." It might be added—possibly to-day—that some of them deserved the *sack*.

We had plenty of other showmen visitors besides those of the theatre. I recall, as conjurers, Robert Heller and his sister, and Guibal



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and his lady assistant, both greatly excelling in the "thought-reading" business; and as entertainers, the great Vance, Leybourne, Arthur Lloyd, Stead the "Perfect Cure," Fred. Maccabe, and lots more who now are only names, but were cheered to the echo in their day. Vance was an accomplished showman, but his talent as a vocalist was inconsiderable. He dressed elaborately, and made great play with a succession of newly-laundered white cambric handkerchiefs, which he drew one by one from his pockets with a magnificent air. My word, what a laundry bill he must have had every week! He drove about the town in the daytime in a small carriage drawn by two cream-coloured ponies, with the smartest of "tigers"; it was all for *réclame*, and very good *réclame* it was. He made lots of money, but he was lavish with it and died very poor. And so did Fred. Maccabe—in a workhouse, I believe.

How many years ago is it since I saw Vesta Tilley (now Lady de Freece) play in a Birmingham pantomime and win the hearts of everybody with her complimentary song, "Three Cheers for Birmingham"? To notice all these artists from time to time was part of the journalist's duty, and, to tell the truth, it was not the least pleasant part.

At one time while in Birmingham I went in for autograph hunting, and the expedients to which I resorted in order to "draw" reluctant victims

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formed the subject of a paper called "The Confessions of an Autograph Hunter," which I contributed a few years later to one of the early numbers of the *Connoisseur*. A collector, let me allow, is a being without a conscience. The commandment, "Thou shalt not covet" is a dead letter with him. Sometimes he has been known to ignore that other which says: "Thou shalt not steal." The collector of antique furniture is fortunately compelled to be relatively honest, for he cannot very well pocket a Sheraton sideboard, or a Queen Anne tallboy; but the bric-à-brac hunter, the picker-up of Apostle spoons, or Caroline porringers, or Cosway miniatures, or anything antique in the portable way, has occasionally the makings of a first-class pickpocket in him.

Autographs of celebrities, or of celebrities *pro tem.*, are not, happily for my peace of mind to-day, obtained in that primitive fashion. You have to angle for them with all sorts of baits—the bait of flattery, the bait of cajolery, the bait of spurious interest, and the bait of manufactured occasion. I obtained the late Duke of Cambridge's by saying I wanted it to complete my collection of "distinguished military commanders"; that of "George Eliot" by asking her to be president of a society that would only have been called into existence if she had consented to act; that of Jenny Lind (Madame Goldschmidt) by recollections of a marvellous voice that I had never

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heard; and that of an eminent man of letters who made it a rule of refusing such requests, by criticising one of his books in the paper, and then writing as an indignant admirer to ask his opinion of the critic.

I will not attempt to defend this strategy; I can only plead in extenuation that I was a collector. As a rule, however, the people applied to complied readily enough; they rather seemed to like it. I never knew an actor or an actress refuse, even when a stamped envelope was not enclosed for a reply. Some notabilities were even generous enough to add a bit of their own, or some one else's, wisdom. Mark Twain said on his postcard—

“We know there is universal suffrage, we believe there is a hell. The question is, which do we prefer?”

Victor Hugo gave a French proverb—

“Qui donne aux pauvres prête au Dieu.”

Lord Chief Justice Cockburn was accommodating, but artful. He wrote his signature at the very top of a small piece of paper, so that by no possibility could any one put an I.O.U. over it. “Legal caution,” perhaps, but I should call it an ungenerous lack of confidence. When I had got nearly everybody that was worth getting, and a great many people whose fame was ephemeral and are now forgotten, I became tired of the hobby, and turned my acquisitive talents to the more decorative subject of old prints. If I were to recommence autograph-hunting to-morrow, how

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many people are there, outside the heroes of the War, and a handful of literary and scientific men, whose handwriting will have the smallest interest in twenty years, or even in ten years' time? Yet at every gathering of second- and third-rate "celebrities" the collector's programme goes round for their autographs, which they cheerfully scribble. After all, it's a compliment to be asked, and a compliment, at least, demands a courteous acknowledgment.

Towards the end of 1888, I left the *Mail* to take up the editorship of the *Daily (Evening) Times*. Of my work on the *Mail* it is not for me to speak, but I may perhaps be allowed to quote a passage from a book review by Mr. H. G. Hibbert in the *Sunday Times* in February 1920: "The *Birmingham Daily Mail*, created by a brilliant journalist, Henry J. Jennings, was in the late 'eighties one of the most remarkable papers of the day in the liberality of its news and entertainment, the variety of its contents, the catholicity of its interest, not forgetting womenfolk." I want no better testimonial than that.

It cannot be said that the *Daily Times* was prospering greatly when I joined it, but it had tempting possibilities. As, in addition to a fixed salary, I was to have a fourth of the profits, I had every inducement to put my back into the business. Unfortunately, Conservatism in Birmingham at that time was a house divided against itself, owing to the fact that many of the younger members

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of the party pinned their faith to Lord Randolph Churchill and his " democratic " programme, while the older members clung to the central organisation. This was the cause of misunderstandings and a lack of definite tone in the editorials.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, we carried on for more than twelve months. The staff worked their hardest, and we obtained a greatly increased circulation and an improving advertisement revenue. I met Lord Randolph at dinner on two or three occasions, and his very attractive wife, then the mother of a boy of fifteen, who was later to make some noise in the world as Winston Spencer Churchill, M.P. Lord Randolph did not strike me as being a joyous spirit. After a few sentences of gruff comment, he generally subsided into a silence that was almost morose, and soon after dinner disappeared altogether for the rest of the evening, leaving his wife and his host to entertain the guests specially invited to meet him. In the conduct of the paper, I had the benefit of his advice—or shall I say, direction?—in a number of letters which, on the whole, I do not think it would serve any good purpose to print. Politics, however, did not occupy a greater part of our attention than was absolutely necessary. It was clear that my idea of a paper that should judge every measure, irrespective of party, on its merits was impossible of realisation in Birmingham. I became as lukewarm as a nominal Conservative as I had been as a nominal Liberal;



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or, to put it more exactly, on some questions I was an enthusiastic Liberal and on others an ardent Tory.

In the other departments of journalism we tried to make the paper interesting. In this endeavour I wrote a series of articles on local Men of Note. I am afraid it made me some enemies. The opinions were too acidulated; there was too great a striving to say smart things whether they hurt or not. There were some passages, and one or two entire articles, that I should be glad to know now had never been written. I am sorry that they were. Having thus tardily expressed my regret, let me turn to an incident with an amusing side. It was our custom to announce beforehand the name of the gentleman who was to be put under the microscope on the following Monday. Curiosity was caused when one of these announcements, instead of giving a name, substituted the phrase "a well-known local journalist." Who could it be? Was it the eminent editor of the *Post*, or the plodding editor of the *Gazette*, or was it a lesser light of those dazzling firmaments? Conjecture was on tip-toe. Hints were indirectly conveyed to me that there was a law of libel. I seemed to be living in visions of infinite horsewhips.

When the threatened article appeared and its subject was found to "Mr. H. J. Jennings, by Himself," there was a general outburst of laughter. The impudence of the thing verged on the

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incredible ! That any mere newspaper man should put himself forward in a category with men of light and leading could only be treated as a colossal joke. And so it was. The article itself was pure farce. I voluntarily went into the pillory and pelted myself with bad eggs ; or, to make a less pretentious simile, I dressed myself up as an Aunt Sally and shied the sticks at my own head. In a measure, perhaps, it served a purpose by making it appear possible that a cynical humour, rather than ill-nature, had prompted the shafts of ridicule which had inflicted wounds in some of the preceding articles.

Apart from this, the short history of the *Daily Times* under my direction was uneventful. We gained ground, but so slowly that the hopes of the shareholders for a dividend, to say nothing of the 25 per cent. profits to which I had been looking forward, seemed very remote. My co-directors, after carefully examining the situation, felt at last that there was not much commercial hope in the circumstances ; consequently, when I suggested that it would be better to close down and save the shareholders from an entire loss of their capital, that drastic and mournful course was agreed to. An extraordinary general meeting was called, and we performed the happy despatch, announcing in the same night's issue that the *Daily Times* would not appear again.

## CHAPTER XXI

A daring enterprise—What are Milwaukeees?—City scandals—  
Frequenters of the Café Royal—Pilotelle and Oscar Wilde—  
Toole's ruined plot.

I HAD intended to take a few months' rest, but the very same day Mr. H. H. Marks, one of our directors, and the editor of the *Financial News*, offered me the post of "managing editor"—which really meant assistant, and occasionally deputy, editor—on his paper, and as I was anxious to get to London, I accepted it. It was, all things considered, the most audacious action of my life. I knew nothing about finance. I did not know the name of a single American railway. To save my life I could not have told offhand what a "gold premium" meant, or the "par of exchange," or "the bimetallic theory." Of the movements of the Funds, the working of the foreign exchanges and the meaning of the weekly Bank Return, I was profoundly ignorant—like a blind man groping in a Cimmerian cave. Appointing me managing editor was like putting a man who had never been to sea in command of a battle-cruiser.

As I look back upon that step, I marvel at my own temerity as much as Clive ever marvelled at his moderation. It was no case of a *pis aller*. I

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had had an offer some few months earlier from the proprietor of a go-ahead weekly paper in the north, and I knew that it still held good. But I had the adventurous temperament of a Young Norval. I had heard fascinating tales of the Stock Exchange and of fortunes made by financial journalists, and I longed, not "to follow to the field some warlike lord," but to penetrate the mysteries of "the City" and take a part in its world-shaking movements.

Within a few days, therefore, I was settled in Abchurch Lane, E.C., where the offices of the "F.N." were then situated, and the first instruction I received was to write "a bull leader on Milwaukeees." The instruction did not convey much. What was a "bull leader"? One has heard of a boy's tutor being called a "bear leader"; was a bull leader at all the same sort of thing? Then what on earth were "Milwaukeees"? Were they something to eat, or a tribe of Indians, or the name of a constellation, or what? In answer to a timid inquiry some one informed me that they were "Grangers." This was no great aid. The next puzzle was, what were Grangers? Luckily an index to previous articles was kept on the premises, and with the aid of this and some dusty exploration among the bound files, I managed to get enough leading points about the Chicago Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway to put together an article that only needed a little "market" seasoning to give it the required bull flavour. As I was

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finishing it off, some of the other members of the staff, literary and commercial, came buzzing round me, wanting to know what I was going to say, and in what terms I was going to say it. At first I thought this attention was due to a disinterested desire to keep a raw beginner from making an ass of himself; but I was rudely undeceived when one gentleman, a little blunter than the rest, asked me plainly if the tone of the article would justify him in buying a couple of hundred shares "for the turn." Then the scales fell from my eyes. It was clear that I was expected, primarily and above all else, to write up the shares and to find or manufacture facts and arguments to support my view. Those of my colleagues who could find a broker to deal for them wanted to "make a bit," and I was to be the instrument of their success. It did not matter what "Milwaukees" were likely to do the next year or the year after; what *did* matter was, what they were going to do under the skilful persuasion of the "F.N." the very next morning. It was buying by the public that sent up prices, and it was the plausible advocacy of the financial expert (!) that encouraged the public to buy. Those "in the know" who had bought before the article appeared were able to take advantage of the morrow's jump of a dollar or so, and ride off gaily with their gains.

This, please remember, was back in the spring of 1890, when financial journalism was much more



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irresponsible, and was conducted with much less good faith, than it is to-day. I am quite sure that Dr. E. T. Powell, the present accomplished editor, would countenance nothing of the kind. During his able régime, the "F.N.," which got dragged in the dirt by the unscrupulosity of men who are now dead, has become a highly respectable and honestly-managed organ. Although there is no reason, save that of prudence, why a writer should not back his opinions, there is always the danger that self-interest may tempt him to exaggerate his case.

This sort of thing was, however, venial in comparison with some of the offences that were alleged against financial journalism about the time I am writing of. Offensive personalities were placarded in the City every day. A great deal that was unsavoury came out in the prosecution for libel by Mr. Marks of a man named Butterfield. I do not propose to disinter the story. Perhaps the most interesting feature of that now-forgotten trial was the crumpling-up of the hectoring Q.C., Sir Charles (afterwards Lord) Russell, at the hands of a young stuff-gownsmen named Charles Gill. Mr. (now Sir Charles) Gill cross-examined the prosecutor with pertinacious dexterity, but he often got back ready-witted replies that turned the laughter in court against him. Mr. Marks took care that these should be recorded in the "F.N.," for I saw a telegram he sent to the sub-editor at the close of one day's proceedings,

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when his answers had been unusually effective, and it ran : " Put the hooks in the gill."

In spite of disagreeable incidents we were a rather merry crew in Abchurch Lane. The Stock Markets were active, money was quickly and easily made, and money, when easily made, easily goes. Many City men in those prosperous days used to dine pretty regularly at the Café Royal, Regent Street. I often went there myself for a meal in the less expensive café on the ground floor, where one formed part of as cosmopolitan a crowd as could be seen anywhere in Europe. Interesting people were often there, speculators, actors, painters, *chevaliers d'industrie*, and fugitives from justice, as well as prominent City merchants and West End professional men of the highest respectability. One of the *habitués* was Señor Montejo, the Spanish Consul-General, who usually occupied a corner seat, surrounded by a group of his countrymen. He was a patriotic Spaniard, for he drank regularly a wine called Riorja, a custom that, according to my palate, required dogged courage and an iron stomach. The outbreak of the Hispano-American War practically caused his death. Remittances from Madrid ceased, and loss of income, added to the bitterness of his country's humiliation, broke him up altogether, and the corner that had known him for so long knew him no more.

Pilotelle, the French Communist, was another frequenter. He was during many years exiled

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from France on account of political excesses, including something more than a hand in the destruction of the Vendôme Column when the Commune was in possession of Paris. He was a very big man, gross and corpulent, with an enigmatical cast of features suggesting both the sardonic and the sensual. For a long time he made a handsome income by drawing fashion plates for the ladies' papers, but when a new and more attractive artistic style came into vogue, his wasp-waisted women, drawn with pen and ink, were no longer in request, and he consequently fell on evil days. It was then that I chanced to make his acquaintance, and a few glasses of absinthe made him my friend for at least an evening. He was a man, as might be inferred from his antecedents, of advanced theories of government, and daringly heterodox views. In due course an Amnesty Act was passed in France under favour of which he was allowed to return. But it was too late; he was out of date, an exponent of principles no longer reputable outside Montmartre, and unpopular even with his old-time associates. He died, I am told, some twenty years ago in a Paris garret.

A third luminary of the café (I apologise to the shade of Pilotelle for putting him in such company) was Oscar Wilde, who was often to be seen there, the centre of a group of admiring satellites. There is no need to describe Wilde—his fleshy, sensual face must be a familiar memory to all

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who had seen him. He dazzled his little circle with epigrams and paradoxes, and although these were clever enough as verbal pyrotechnics, they were mouthed with such an insufferable air of conceit that men at adjoining tables often found their feet tingling to kick him. Little did any one who saw him in those days, the object of almost sycophantic adulation, foresee the contrast that was coming. When the great scandal led to his action for libel against the Marquis of Queensberry, I was in court during his cross-examination by Sir Edward Carson. How he writhed and bleated ! And how terrible was the pitiless questioning to which he had to submit at the hands of the gaunt, impassive and relentless counsel, who seemed, as he drove home his searching interrogation, to be a veritable personification of Nemesis !

London life gave me more opportunities than before of keeping in touch with my friends of the theatre. One of the most cherished of these was J. L. Toole. Every one loved "Johnny." Unhappily his domestic life, at one time so bright and joyous, was clouded by three great griefs. One after the other he lost wife, son and daughter, and was left to face old age ungladdened by the more intimate family ties. Friends he had by the score, all ready to do anything in their power to contribute to his pleasure. He always seemed to me more spontaneous and happy at the house of old theatrical associates like the Billingtons, than

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at the set parties given in his honour. My faith ! what times of roaring merriment we have had—what *noctes cœnæque deum*—under the hospitable roof of those honourable old Adelphi favourites. Toole was not a dinner-table wit, but he was full of fun, and readily appreciated wit in others, as, for example, when some one told Billington, who was trying with dire results to carve a hare, that Yorkshiremen were never good at splitting hairs.

After I removed to London I saw a great deal more of Toole, and frequently dined with him at the Garrick Club and at his house in Maida Vale. His love of practical joking has been chronicled almost *ad nauseam*, yet I hope I may venture to tell one more story about it.

It had been arranged that on a certain Sunday he should come to my house in Hampstead and have an early dinner *en famille*. In the course of the morning I received a letter from him, by hand, to the effect that he was a bit seedy, and did not think he would be able to come, but as his brother had turned up from Australia and was somewhat at a loose end, would I mind entertaining him instead? It seemed a strange request—I had never heard anything of a brother in Australia. The more I considered it, the more I suspected my waggish friend of one of his little hoaxes. Twenty minutes or so before the appointed hour for dinner, a cab drove up and the maid announced that “the gentleman had come.” As soon as he entered the room I saw through his



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disguise. In spite of a wavy silver-grey wig and moustache, and side-whiskers to match, it was undoubtedly the real Simon Pure and no antipodean brother. He was dressed in black with what used to be known as an M.B. waistcoat, and a stiff collar-band, as if to give the impression of something in the clerical line. My first impulse was to slap him on the back and tell him that he was an old fraud; but I restrained myself and pretended that I accepted, without the smallest degree of incredulity, the story of the Australian brother, and rained questions upon him about Johnny's health, about life in Australia, about long sea-voyages—anything I could think of to catch him tripping. He played the game carefully in a feigned throaty voice, and presently explained that his "brother" thought it better, as he could eat no dinner himself, to send a substitute, lest his absence should disarrange the table.

This was my cue: "Dinner!" I exclaimed in a surprised tone, "there must be a mistake. I did not expect Johnny to dinner. The fact is, we had our dinner at mid-day, so as to be ready for the meeting." I was all the while on tenter-hooks lest the maid should come to say that dinner was served.

"Meeting," he said, "what meeting?" "Why, the meeting for the Relief of Distressed Clergy, of course. I expect an Archdeacon and a rural dean." "Do you mean to say there's no dinner?"

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asked the sham Australian, in a disappointed tone. "Evidently my brother mixed up your invitation with some one else's. If you'll excuse me, I don't think I'll stay for the meeting. By the way, is there any chance of getting a cab near here?"

The joke had gone far enough; it was on the stroke of dinner-time, so I gave him the deferred slap on the back, and said: "Johnny, I knew you all the time. There, go upstairs, old fellow, take off your undeceiving make-up, and we'll see if there's anything to eat." He always declared that he knew from the first that I recognised him and only kept up the personation for the fun of the thing. I have my doubts. After dinner, I drank his health with mock ceremony, and hinted that he was the very reverse of Garrick, of whom Goldsmith said: "'Twas only that when he was off he was acting."

During the latter part of his life, Toole lived mostly at the Old Ship at Brighton. He was physically incapable of any exercise, had to be wheeled about in a Bath chair and to have his food cut up for him. I often went down to see him, and there was generally a merry little party in his room and a game of poker after dinner. Whatever help he may have wanted in other ways, he wanted none at poker. He knew what he was about, and seldom left off a loser. If his nerves were shattered, his wits were not. Although as his malady progressed it became more

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and more painful to watch him, yet he retained his cheerfulness of spirits up to within a comparatively short period of his death. When the end came, British playgoers felt that they had lost not only a favourite, but also a friend.

## CHAPTER XXII

The pleasures of a city editor—A Stock Exchange Boom—Barney Barnato—Cecil Rhodes—The meteoric Mr. Hooley—City sharks in evidence—A rude company promoter rebuked—Blackmailers—Axe-grinding visitors.

IT took me two or three years to pick up the more important threads of the intricate subject of finance, and even then I had still a great deal to learn. I was, however, qualified by that time to write on most matters of Stock Market interest and to give directions to the staff-writers and outside contributors who assisted in filling the editorial columns. It was then that I began to thoroughly enjoy my work. I had no longer to go hunting about for materials; I knew where to put my hand on them at once. When the "tricks of the trade" are once mastered—(there is no short cut to mastering them; it takes, as I have suggested, some years of practical experience)—there is a particular fascination in writing about finance. You discuss millions as freely as a huckster talks about pence. You criticise Chancellors of the Exchequer and Bank chairmen with a superior cock-sure air, as if you knew their business much better than they do. You superciliously analyse balance-sheets that have been

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certified by the most eminent chartered accountants. You condemn this company and praise that with the confident note of authority. You tell the public what to invest their surplus money in, and what shares they would be wise to leave alone. You sit all day in an office delivering *ex cathedrâ* judgments in matters involving enormous pecuniary issues. And you do it all with the easy unconcern of a born millionaire, although you may not be worth a million farthings. There is no other department of journalism half so attractive or so appealing to personal vanity. The wrangles of politicians are tame beside the fierce strife of "bulls" and "bears"; the stories of adventure in unknown territory are uninspiring compared with the stories of adventure in Throgmorton Street. Fiction is commonplace beside the romance of finance, with its mysterious jargon of "percentages," and "share bonuses," and "over-capitalisations," and what not. Who could not be happy wielding a pen that helps to influence the great movements which ebb and flow about the Money Market? In such a task the veriest cipher of a commentator swells with self-importance, and a City Editor excusably believes himself to be a god.

My City experience enabled me to witness at close quarters that strange phenomenon, a "boom." No pen could do adequate justice to what was known as the South African Boom. It was like the South Sea Bubble over again, and



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scores of the mining shares that were "boosted up" to be foisted on a credulous public had no more value than those in the company said to have been formed for extracting sunbeams from cucumbers. Merit had nothing to do with the majority of the rises, nor had probabilities. In the wake of the greater enterprises came a ragged regiment of worthless companies, conceived in fraud and born in credulity. Evening after evening, after the official closing of the Stock Exchange, the "street" itself became a busy, noisy market, thronged with a struggling, excited, noisy crowd of kerbstone gamblers, and the police had to make special arrangements to enable vehicles to go through. The roulette tables at Monte Carlo were tame compared with this Inferno of greed. Every face was a study, and a glance at any one of them was enough to show whether prices were going up or down. As long as markets were rising, every one was jubilant, for every one was a "bull"; but when a set-back took place, the smiles of satisfaction were changed for looks of anxiety, and dimples were replaced by creases. The licensed houses in the neighbourhood did a profitable trade; never was there such a popping of champagne corks, never such hilarious greetings and indiscriminate treating. But when some damaging rumour was set on foot, such as the sudden death of a big speculator, there ensued a wild scramble to close, and a collapse of prices, and haggard and bewildered men rushed from

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office to office to ascertain what truth, if any, was in the rumour.

Among the prominent figures in the liveliest days of the boom was Barney Barnato. They used to say, I know not with what truth, that he was originally a street conjuror in Johannesburg; whatever his origin, he must have had a daring and far-seeing mind, as well as an acquisitive nature, for he seemed to do exactly the right thing at the right moment, and most of his ventures, whether in gold or diamonds, prospered exceedingly. I frequently met him; sometimes he would volunteer a "tip," but it by no means followed that to act on that tip ensured any pecuniary benefit. No one, not even the members of the now defunct "Thieves' Kitchen," was ever known to accuse him of excessive liberality, and in the everyday habit of standing treat, which amounted to a religious observance with Stock Exchange men, his knowledge of what custom expected was defective, or, at the best, one-sided. Fortune was too much for him, and his end was tragic.

An entirely different type of man was Cecil Rhodes, with whom I had several chats about the British South Africa Company. Concerning the market movements of the shares he appeared to care nothing; his mind was focussed on the future, and not a very near future at that. His faith in it was boundless. He did not then foresee the Raid which "upset the apple-cart," or the Boer War; but even if he had done, I think his faith

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would have been none the less. Rhodesia, whether it is linked up with the great Confederacy of South Africa or not, is yet destined to play a great pastoral part and enhance the greatness of the British Empire.

The death of one boom is often the birth of another; and if it is not, there are recurrent outbreaks of speculative mania that may be looked for with very nearly the periodicity of comets. In their turn, the Railway mania, the Nitrate boom, the Californian, Australian and South African gold fevers, the Copper boom, the Cycle boom, the Brewery boom, the Rubber boom, the Cinema boom and the Oil boom, have captured men's judgments and swirled them along in a dangerous current. In every instance, future improvements have been discounted by astute investors and prices have steadily risen, and then the ignorant million, influenced very largely by interested predictions, has carried on the game until markets have become top-heavy and the inflated values have run down with a crash.

The Cycle boom which followed at a comparatively short interval the fading interest in Kaffirs, was at the outset a natural result of the prosperity of a new and promising industry. But like most good things it was overdone. Good companies were followed by less good, and, in some cases, by worthless companies. The indiscriminating public tumbled over one another to subscribe, and for a while things went swimmingly.

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By far and away the most prominent promoter was Mr. E. T. Hooley. His headquarters in the high noon of his activity were at the Midland Hotel, St. Pancras, where he had a large suite of rooms, and was surrounded from morning to night with helpers and hangers-on. That extraordinary man, A. M. Broadley, was in his entourage for some months. As most people know, Hooley got into financial difficulties later on, and, in order to protect the estate, filed his own petition. Then followed the long and sensational investigation in the Bankruptcy Court, and the mean and ungracious censures of many who had been pecuniarily benefited by their connexion with him. While it is impossible to approve of his speculative extremes, or of his optimistic way of looking at things, or of his too-dashing methods of finance, it is only fair to remember that he was the victim in some cases of misrepresentation, and was often imposed upon. Certain people batted upon him; I could name several, but they are all dead, and it is not worth while.

Company promoters in those days were, like angels, of two sorts. There were honest and dishonest promoters, and when the gambling fever—humorously called an “investment boom”—was raging, the latter were the more numerous. Their activities were by no means limited to “salted” gold-mines; they ranged over a wide commercial field, inviting the co-operation of country parsons, retired tradesmen and struggling



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widows in floating bankrupt businesses, and in exploiting patented inventions with as much chance of earning dividends as a one-legged man has of winning a hundred-yards race. At the height of this boom, bubble companies, blown only to burst, were brought out nearly every day, and the financial papers were bulky with extra pages of promoters' taradiddles. It was a fat time of advertisement revenue.

A number of company promoters hovered about the "F.N." office during the boom. Company promoters in that day were a mixed lot, and even the shady ones had their different degrees of shadiness, but all of them had this feature in common with the *lion comique* of the period: they wore heavy astrakhan collars and cuffs to their coats, and tilted their silk hats at a rakish angle. It was not the "get-up" to impress a bank manager, but it must be assumed that it was intended to impress such more susceptible cattle as editors. No one ever saw a company promoter in the city wearing a bowler, or a Trilby, or a straw, or indeed anything but an immaculately glossy silk hat. It was his badge of respectability, the "Open Sesame" to public confidence. I believe there are still important offices in London where no one unless he comes wearing a silk hat is allowed to have an interview with the chief. His moral character may be as black as midnight, his sins of omission and commission many, but if he has the outward and visible sign of



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commercial standing, he is admitted to the great man's sanctum without further inquiry.

There was one of these company promoters whom I particularly disliked, because he invariably treated me with a contemptuous hauteur, such as the Almighty, as some one has said, would not have employed to a black-beetle. One day I was waiting in the outer office of Marks's private room, and this objectionable person was also waiting. Presently my name was called, and I was about to go in when he jumped in front of me, pushed me aside, and said: "My business is more important than yours. You wait till I've finished." This is where Marks came in at his best. Although the man was spending considerable sums in advertising, Marks turned sharply on him, and said: "Excuse me, nobody's business is more important than Mr. Jennings's. You sit down and wait till I am ready to see you, and don't ever be rude to any of my staff again." A few years later that pompous, fur-coated little rogue was sent to prison for obtaining money by fraud.

With the fraudulent company promoter flourished the "bucket-shop" spider, who coaxed credulous flies into his parlour with promises of an El Dorado, to be reached with no greater risk than the possible loss of an insignificant "cover." It was artfully arranged by the spider that the cover should always run off, which meant that it went into his own pocket, and that, in order to entice more cover, the El Dorado should continue to

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glitter like a beautiful mirage in the inaccessible "beyond."

Though there were plenty of warnings against the City sharks, people, strange to say, were in a hurry to be devoured by them. Shoals of get-rich-quick speculators all over the country were well "on the feed," and snapped greedily at the shining baits spread here, there and everywhere. Frequent prosecutions failed to appreciably lessen the number of bucket-shop keepers, some of whom waxed fat on their plunder, had house-boats at Henley, entertained lavishly, and sent their sons to Public Schools and their daughters to Paris. Scathing exposures in the smaller financial papers of those tactless scamps who neglected to advertise with them had no effect whatever; the subjects of attack simply laughed, and pointed to the animus. And so the game of beggar-my-neighbour went gaily on during several years. Oh, those City sharks! I can recall quite a lot of them who, sooner or later, came to grief. Many City men will remember a certain glossy and debonair solicitor, immaculately dressed, who drove a four-in-hand to race meetings, and was foremost in the competition of extravagance. He was never without some ingenious device for getting hold of other people's money and evading the legal consequences. But at last the pitcher went once too often to the well, and the manicured fingers of that magnificent creature had to "waste their sweetness" on the rude task of picking

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oakum. There were lots more, splendid beings, always in fur-lined coats, always smoking expensive cigars, who must have found the enforced hospitality of the Sovereign rather irksome. Some of them, having completed their temporary withdrawal from society, came back to the City serene and smiling, having resolved with a fine charity to condone their own past; and with an unexhausted stock-in-trade of plausibility and guile they soon found mischief for their idle hands and money for their empty pockets.

Blackmailers in plenty there were at that time, and they carried on their vile trade openly and unabashed. Half-a-dozen weekly papers were hawked about the streets containing exposures, or threatened exposures, of prominent men whom the blackmailers thought it was worth while to "go for." "The truth about ——" stared one in the face every day in the neighbourhood of the Stock Exchange. Sometimes the authors of these desperate libels were "squared"; more often they were not. In a few instances they were prosecuted, but the criminal proceedings were not always successful. The truth is, that a reckless and dishonest employment of financial opportunities for personal gain had brought into existence along with it an equally reckless and dishonest crowd of curious critics who wanted a share of the plunder, and juries were unable to discriminate between pot and kettle, and either acquitted the accused, or, more frequently, failed to agree.

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We had lots of visitors at the "F.N.," but the majority of them came with their own axes to grind. The most innocent-looking contributed news-paragraph often concealed something which the contributor hoped would be beneficial to him. No editorial vigilance was equal to detecting all the hidden "bull" points, or to discovering, behind the mask of apparent disinterestedness, the germ of selfish greed. Our generous informants always tried to stimulate our interest by assuring us that what they offered was exclusive news: "It would not appear in any other paper"; but "in vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird."

One well-known street "operator," otherwise speculator, came rushing into the office one day with the startling intelligence that all the bridges on the Brighton line had been condemned as unsafe. As a matter of fact, one bridge had shown signs of weakness, and was to be rebuilt, but that was not sensational enough to cause a heavy fall in the sensitive Brighton "A" stock, so our informant amplified and embellished the one bald bit of fact until it grew almost to a question involving the national safety. But I was not in a very credulous mood that morning, and positively declined to give heed to the story without official confirmation. "What more do you want?" asked the gentleman. "It's posted up in the Stock Exchange." This was a lie, and I knew it to be a lie, because if it had been true it would have come through to the office on the tape, and there was no such intelligence, or even a hint of it.



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It might have been inferred without much probability of error that the inventor of this pretty romance was a "bear" of the stock. He had, in fact, sold a line of £10,000 before he started the rumour, and he hoped to get a confirmatory paragraph in the paper to help him in his artful game. He failed, the stock did not fall, and his carefully arranged *coup* did not come off.

He was fertile in exploits of this kind, but one day he carried another of his egregious inventions to a financial journal that he had deceived before, and that was not in a mood to be again made the vehicle of false news. This was a disastrous venture. The paper printed the statement, indeed, but with a flat official contradiction, and the speculator's house of cards was thereby knocked into smithereens. He lost a large amount of money as a result, and the story becoming known, his reputation as a "tipster" was sorely shaken. Rung by rung he went down the ladder, until at last no broker would trust him, and he vanished from "the street" in which he had figured for so long in the character of a financial Ananias.



## CHAPTER XXIII

Advice gratis—How to make enemies—A bimetallist crank—  
How "Wicked Bill" was punished—Where are Berthas, and  
Doras, and Coras of the past?—My colleagues on the "F.N."

THERE is no need to dwell longer on the seamy side of finance, or to write anything that might throw discredit on the other and better side. After a fair experience of the Stock Exchange and the leading financial houses, I have no hesitation in saying that the great bulk of City business, whether speculative or investment, is perfectly straightforward, and carried out by men of honour and good faith. That the Stock Exchange before the War was something of a fly-trap cannot be denied, but the flies crawled in of their own accord; no one invited them to go in; and if they found themselves stuck there it was largely their own fault. If you *must* gamble, you may be sure, except in very, very rare instances, of fair treatment on the Stock Exchange. My own experience, nevertheless, compels me to say, "Let it alone!" With great "inside" opportunities and very often first-hand information, the net result in my own case was disappointing. At one time I made money; at another I lost it. And what was more serious, I lost some of my friends through incautiously recommending them

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to follow my own example. If you want to live unharassed days, and to sleep dreamless nights, never give a tip. Whenever I had reliable exclusive information likely to affect markets, I felt bound to impart it to my intimate friends, and to let them share in what looked like a gift from heaven. But sometimes the exclusive information, like mice and men, went "a-gley," and instead of jingling easily-gotten gold, those friends had to draw cheques for the payment of unexpected "differences." Wonderful, indeed, is the friendship that can stand a strain like that.

One very intimate friend, the sort of man you would call a "pal," often came to me to advise him. He was a fairly rich man, and had no need to be dabbling in speculation to swell an already comfortable hoard; but after one or two satisfactory *coups*, he developed the fever badly, and was continually "on my doorstep," so to speak, pestering me to tell him of "something good." One day I received information from an unquestionably trustworthy source that Rio Tinto copper shares were going to be "split," an operation that seemed certain to enhance their market value. I advised my friend to buy 500, and to take them up for permanent holding. He did as I suggested, but within a few weeks the shares dropped a point or so, he became alarmed, and his nervous broker told him the copper market looked weak and that it would be prudent to sell out before it got weaker. No sooner had he sold than the con-

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templated splitting project was officially announced, there was a big jump in the shares, and with occasional slight reactions they continued to rise until he might, if he had only sat tight, have made a profit of two or three thousand pounds. And he blamed me because he had not made that profit ! He seemed to think that I had robbed him of it. The resulting coldness grew into enmity, he wrote abusive letters, charged me with all sorts of crimes, slandered me behind my back, and posed as the ill-used victim of a wicked traitor.

One of the crazes of the last decade of the century was "Bimetallism." I am not going to turn the reader's hair white, or endanger his reason, by discussing "Bimetallism," which has been described as a creed of financial cranks. So far as I could do, I put it away from me as an unclean thing. But this was a counsel of perfection which sometimes broke down. There were bimetallic fanatics who would not let one alone ; who waited on the doorstep on the chance of firing off their gospel, or tracked one's footsteps to get an opportunity of proving that a monometallic standard was economically wrong, and the straight road to ruin. One, in particular, of these irrepressible bores was for ever pestering me. He used to call three or four times a day at the "F.N." office, and, not content with that, tried to see me at home when I was at breakfast, and at my club when I was eating my dinner. He

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would not be shaken off. Sarcasm had no effect upon him. He seemed actually to gain new persistency when one insulted him. When he did get within striking distance, so to speak, he spluttered out a torrent of talk, and flooded one with arguments and a shower-bath at the same time. There was no getting rid of him, and he was fast becoming a regular Old Man of the Sea when I thought of a plan, which might, at least, divert his energies into a different channel. I referred him to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Of course, I had to give some plausible, if apocryphal, justification for sending him on this fool's errand. I succeeded, after much ingenious endeavour, in persuading him that it was entirely a Government matter, and that only a Cabinet Minister was competent to deal with it practically. He swallowed the bait. He haunted Downing Street. He gave everlasting trouble to the Treasury officials. On one occasion he had the boldness to buttonhole the Chancellor in the street. But his very importunity was his undoing. The officials saw in this lunatic persistency, not the earnestness of a great financial reformer, but the extravagance of a mind distraught. His friends were communicated with and recommended to keep a watch upon his movements. All I know beyond that is that he did not bother me any more. My stratagem had been successful beyond measure, but what the Chancellor of the Exchequer would have thought had he known the circumstances, I



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hardly like to contemplate. He might have made a Star Chamber matter of it.

Sometimes the astute members of the Stock Exchange get entangled in their own toils. There was the famous but now forgotten case of the "corner" in Warner's Safe Cure. When the Company came out and dealings took place in the shares, certain jobbers and others who thought there had been a poor subscription "sold short," that is, sold for future delivery something which they had not got, in the hope of buying it back much cheaper before the special settlement. But the people at the head of the promotion were wily. They kept the bulk of the shares under their own control, and bought up any others that were offered, thus creating a "corner." When settlement day came, the "bears" were in a fluster; they could not deliver because they did not possess, and could not command, the goods. The people who had bought from them were closely associated with the group responsible for the "corner"; indeed, both movements were parts of one concerted plot. Amongst the crestfallen "bears" there was a jobber whose familiar designation was "Wicked Bill." How and why he got that depreciatory name is not recorded, but it is surmised that he was an habitual "bear," one of those unreasonable men who knock down prices which other men want to see rising. One of his performances had been to sell a large number of Warner's Safe Cure shares, bringing



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down their market value with a run. The conspirators bought them as fast as he sold them, and by and by "the band began to play." The harder "Wicked Bill" bade for the shares, the faster his opponents put up the price, until they presently reached a height that meant a fortune to him when he had to pay the differences. As far as I remember, an arrangement was come to, without pushing matters to their extremity, which let him out the loser of many thousands of pounds. "Bears" have been caught since then, but hardly ever have they been skinned alive in so merciless a fashion. "Bears" are not very admirable members of the Throgmorton Street "Zoo," and their tactics, as a rule, are based on purely selfish considerations, but I don't think that, on the whole, the "Wicked Bills" are as contemptible as the sly contrivers of "corners."

Stock Market interests have greatly changed since the last decade of the nineteenth century. The Stock Exchange favourites of one generation are disdainfully regarded by the next. Only in rare circumstances does speculation concentrate for more than a few years on the same counters. Most middle-aged men can remember when the movements in "Berthas" and "Doras" (Brighton "A" and Dover "A") were as active as an April barometer, when "Louisvilles," "Denvers," "Eries" and "Milwaukees" were on the tip of every Stock Exchange tongue. Whoever hears of "Eries" or "Denvers" now? What

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London Stock Exchange reporter ever records the course of American rails? For the time being, they are as dead, on this side the herring-pond, as the Dodo; Rubbers and Oils have taken their place. The "street" talks "Shells" and "Eagles" instead of "Berthas" and "Coras"—those now frayed and faded damsels that were once so skittish. It is interesting to turn up an old newspaper of any date from 1890 to 1900 and study the fierce currents of the time—the throb of speculation, the sweeping ups and downs of now-forgotten shares. Lurking behind those cold figures are the ghosts of shattered hopes, of broken fortunes, and of tragic endings. And now the same game, on a more restricted scale, is being played with a new set of counters, and so the world wags.

I had some able and interesting colleagues on the *Financial News*, men who have since attained distinction. Mr. Charles Reeve was one of the leader writers; he now occupies with success the important position of City Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*. Mr. Joseph Kitchen, who looked after the mining news, is now London Manager of the Union Corporation, a company with a called-up capital of nearly a million. Mr. E. T. Powell, the present editor, was for a time private secretary and parliamentary agent to Mr. H. H. Marks in his Bethnal Green and other candidatures, yet he found time and the dogged perseverance to read for his B.A. and LL.B. degrees at London, was called to

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the Bar, and within the last year or two has received from his University the hood of a Doctor of Laws. These, if I may say so, were the pick of the bunch. There were others whose qualities were not so commendable. One cannot altogether ignore the maxim *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, and one naturally shrinks from painting in unappreciative colours those who are now beyond the reach of, and indifferent to, praise or censure. But I cannot pass by another of Marks's secretaries. He was a good-looking, well-dressed young fellow of the gushing type, who made a considerable splash in certain circles of the West End. It was he who was mainly responsible for the unscrupulous puffing of worthless mining shares, the blame for which fell, for the most part undeservedly, on his chief. He must have made a lot of money at one time, and have got rid of it in gay and extravagant living. I have seen him at the old Pelican Club in Gerrard Street, tossing Hughie Drummond for sovereigns for an hour at a stretch. When he left the "F.N." he took up a confidential position with George Edwardes, the Gaiety manager. Then he figured as correspondent in a divorce case, in which the jury, after a great deal of dirty linen had been washed in Court, practically exonerated the parties all round. When the lady's husband died, he married her. She survived him too, and then, poor woman, dropped gradually from her high estate as a queen of musical comedy, and spent her declining years

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in comparative obscurity and poverty. There are few more pathetic incidents in theatrical history than the clouded exit of the once brilliant and popular Florence St. John.

We had a phenomenon on the staff—a man who had never been known to smile. Whether some deep grief had dried up the springs of laughter, or he was suffering from a physical disability, does not matter; all that does matter is that he never smiled. The most subtle *jeu d'esprit* or the broadest sally of humour failed to produce in him the smallest facial indication of mirth. Every one else might be convulsed with laughter, but *he* did not move a muscle. A joke was to him something incomprehensible, or at any rate uncomprehended. When he heard a merry jest, his impassive features did not relax, there was not a twinkle in his eye, his preternatural gravity was not disturbed by a hair's breadth. We had all grown accustomed to this mirthlessness when the long series of Australian bank failures took place. As the dismal news was cabled day by day the interest in the developments became intense. I was sitting in my room one day in the course of the crisis when the mirthless one came hastily in with—yes, it is the gospel truth I am telling you—a broad grin on his face. “Why, whatever’s up?” I was going to say, but he saved me the trouble by bursting out with: “Another Australian bank’s put up its shutters,” and grinned a bigger grin than before.



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What it was that tickled his latent sense of fun nobody knew then or has found out since. The fact remains that it needed a Colonial crisis to waken into life his dormant faculty of laughter. As soon as he had announced the new calamity, he relapsed into his normal mood. That unique occasion had produced his one and only smile. It is a pity some one was not there with a camera to snapshot such a phenomenal event. He still lives as grave and solemn as ever, and not ten thousand Joe Millers or twenty thousand side-splitting jesters could make him smile again. I always regard him as an ideal undertaker who has taken the wrong turning.



## CHAPTER XXIV

I leave journalism for a time—When I met the ex-Kaiser—A retrospect without much repentance—Still leading a busy life in the belief that work is the best cure for every ill.

AFTER I had been about six years on the "F.N.," I began to feel the need of a change. Daily journalism is exacting work, work at continual high pressure, and thirty-two years of it takes something out of a man, even though he has a sound constitution. Facts have to be collected, arranged and put into some sort of literary shape, and important judgments have to be formed, in a desperate hurry. The printing machine is inexorable; it won't wait, it must be fed and fully fed at the appointed time. I was jaded and longed for emancipation from these toils. My relations with the Chief Editor left nothing to be desired; whatever else may be said about him, he was, in those days, good to his staff, and loyal to those who were loyal to him. But there were always the fetters, the ever-present anxiety about the task to be done in a given time, whether one were sick or sound—whether the material were ready to hand, or the straw for making the bricks had to be gathered in far-off and stubborn fields. And so, although I had nothing else in view, I

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trusted to my luck and burnt my boats. From that time to this my connexion with the literary side of journalism has been mostly that of a free-lance.

I think it is to my credit that I was in editorial charge of papers for twenty-six years, hitting hard most of the time, without incurring more than one civil action for libel, and that a very trivial affair. There were plenty of threats, but the persons attacked knew that they could not face cross-examination, and I knew it too, for in no case did I stave off proceedings by that greatest of all humiliations for a newspaper—a public apology. A writer who makes sure of his facts and writes solely in the public interest without any personal animus, has little to fear from the law, but if he brings reckless charges, or garbles the facts, or ignores the difference between a public duty and a private grudge, then God help him, for the jury won't. Nor is it only his own pen and those of his staff that he must scrupulously and vigilantly control; there is always a chance that some irresponsible correspondent may wrap up in a seemingly innocent letter an imputation that cannot be justified. Communications of a personal nature ought, in the majority of instances, to be thrown into that cemetery of the still-born—the W.P.B. An editor's best credentials are not what he puts in his paper, but what he has the discretion to leave out.

Of the twenty odd years that have since elapsed,

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I have nothing at present to say. Their record would be an anti-climax compared with the exciting times of the previous thirty-two, and the narrative would fall flat. If I am like the one "who left half-told the story of Cambuscan bold," my excuse for such unfinished work must be that the rest of the story is not worth the telling.

There is, however, one incident to which I must refer. On the occasion of the ex-Kaiser's last visit to London, he was entertained by the Lord Mayor and Corporation at a ceremonial luncheon in the historic Guildhall, and spent one of his "off" days in going over the fine furniture galleries of Messrs. Waring & Gillow in Oxford Street. I was retained by the firm to carry out the Press arrangements, and as the presence of reporters during the actual view was not desired, it was decided that I should accompany Mr. (now Sir Samuel) Waring in the discharge of his duties as cicerone. All I had to do was to keep my eyes and ears open, make mental notes, and afterwards communicate a more or less connected narrative to the members of the Press who were in waiting for the purpose. I was consequently within a few yards of the Imperial guest throughout his peregrinations, and heard all his comments, which certainly showed that he knew a good deal about the styles. It was a rare opportunity of seeing at close quarters one who was even then a much-discussed personality. Everything he said seemed so genial and amiable. He was welcomed

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as a friend of the British nation, and outside the building was exhibited a big device announcing in German that "Blood is thicker than water," a device to which he referred in hypocritical terms in his Guildhall speech. Who could have guessed that his apparent urbanity cloaked the bitterest jealousy, or that within a few years he would empty upon the world, and upon this country in particular, the vials of an insane hatred? Who could have guessed, either, that the then so great potentate, head of the Hohenzollerns, and approved ruler of the German people, would now be a dethroned exile, accused of crimes rank and infamous?

I am afraid that in these Reminiscences I have not paid due attention to Dr. Johnson's advice, "A man should be careful never to tell tales of himself to his own disadvantage." It is very good advice if you are setting out on the road of life, but the warning is not so necessary when you are dealing with life retrospectively. At any rate, I am not going to delete anything because it happens to tell against myself. It would be, indeed, strange if one could look through a vista of years, going back to a time when the watchman still perambulated the streets and called out "All's well," and upon the thousands of personal events that troop in shadowy form along that vista, without encountering some act of bad judgment for which one is sorry, some thoughtless word or deed that one would be only too glad to obliterate, or some

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indecision of mind that has been misconstrued by friends of stronger views.

What changes of customs and fashions, what developments in science, have taken place since I made my first appearance in journalism! It is a different world to-day, but it is only when one's memory travels back to the older order that the difference becomes apparent. Least of all is it apparent in journalism, because the changes have been gradual. But it is none the less a fact that English journalism has greatly altered. We have adopted the big, two-column headlines, the pithy paragraphs, the condensed reports, to the exclusion of long, dreary descriptions of unimportant events. In short, the newspapers of to-day are more interesting to the general reader, and if they sometimes play to the gallery we have to remember that the gallery is there to be played to. As an actor in a small way in the development of the modern newspaper I may be forgiven for contrasting it favourably with the stodgy, long-winded and often ungrammatical productions of my early days.

It is perhaps in the nature of things that these recollections should possess a good deal of the character of a necrology. Most of the persons mentioned in them have, in the soldiers' expressive figure of speech, "gone West." In the words of Charles Lamb's poignant lament, "All, all are gone, the old familiar faces." When one is over sixty, one makes acquaintances, one does not



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form friendships; and when one is over seventy, one is apt to find in the society of little children a solace and a pleasure that no adult companionship can rival. I must confess that to sit in a summer garden, under a sheltering tree, with some tiny prattler, promises a greater joy than any to be found in pomp or pageant, in the fascinations of sport, or even in the lure of literature.

But, alas, that is only a beautiful dream. Not for me are the *dolce far niente* days. Instead of the engaging chatter of children, I am doomed to hear the roar of London's traffic. Instead of a sunny nook in an old-world garden, I spend most of the week in gloomy City offices. And, strange to say, I do not find the harness frets me. The truth is that I should be unhappy without work. Work brightens the faculties and lubricates the mental processes. If it were not for the interest of my daily tasks I should quickly grow old, whereas now I feel young enough for any exploit not demanding the muscular strength and agility of the prime of life. If it were left to me, as it was to the King of Scanderoon's jester, to choose my "mode of dying," I should say, "let it be at my desk." I can imagine no more natural and quiet exit for a man of letters, of whatever degree, than that of Charles Dickens, whose death took place when the ink was hardly dry upon the pen with which he had been at work on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

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